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MARVEL PREVIEW FEATURING

BLACKMARK

A Ravaged World Faces Extinction And Only Blackmark Can Save It!

An All-New Graphic Novel Masterpiece:

"THE MIND DEMONS!"

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Stan Lee presents:

MARVEL PREVIEW'S BLACKMARK

"THE MIND DEMONS"

By Gil Kane

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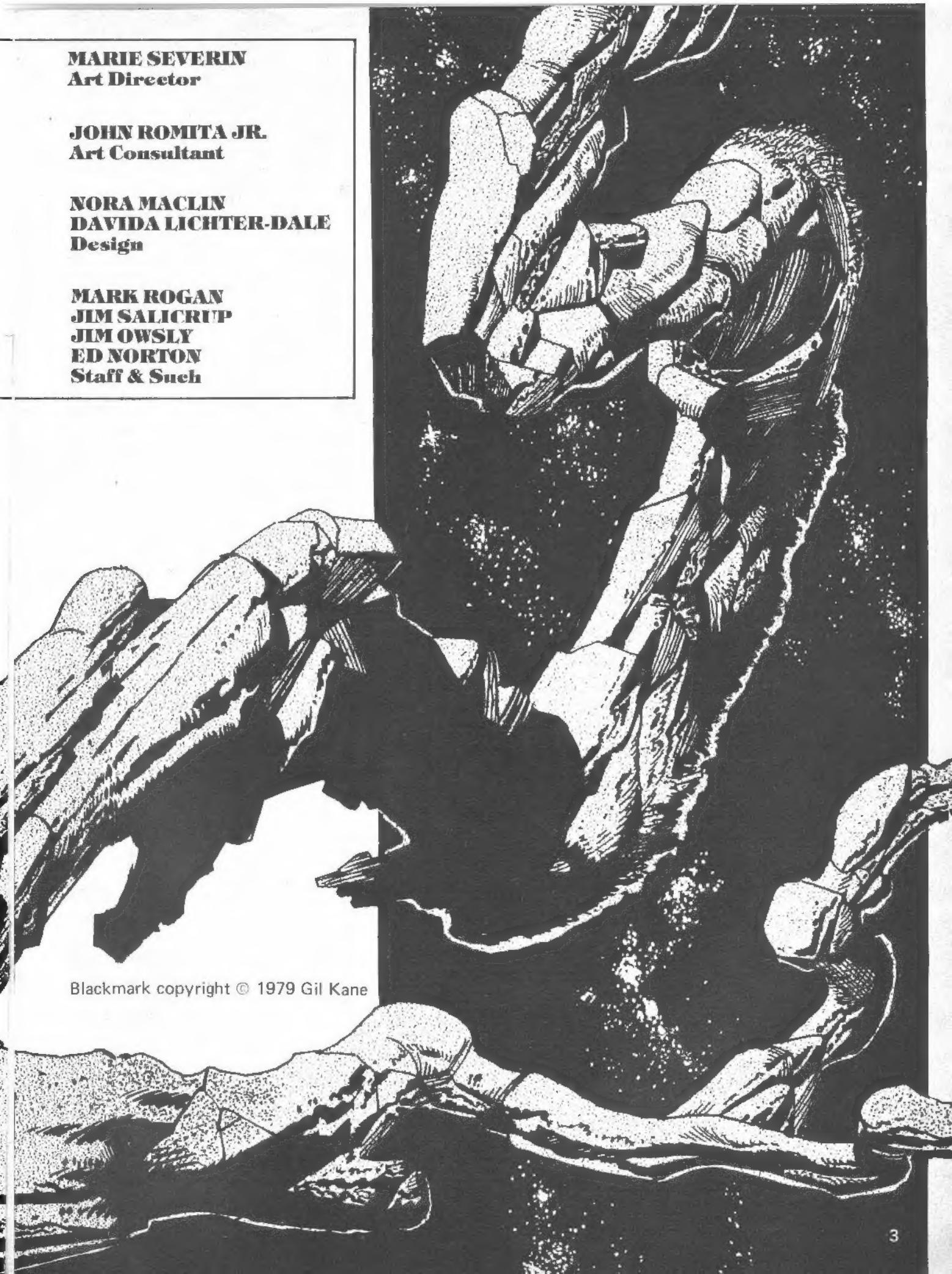

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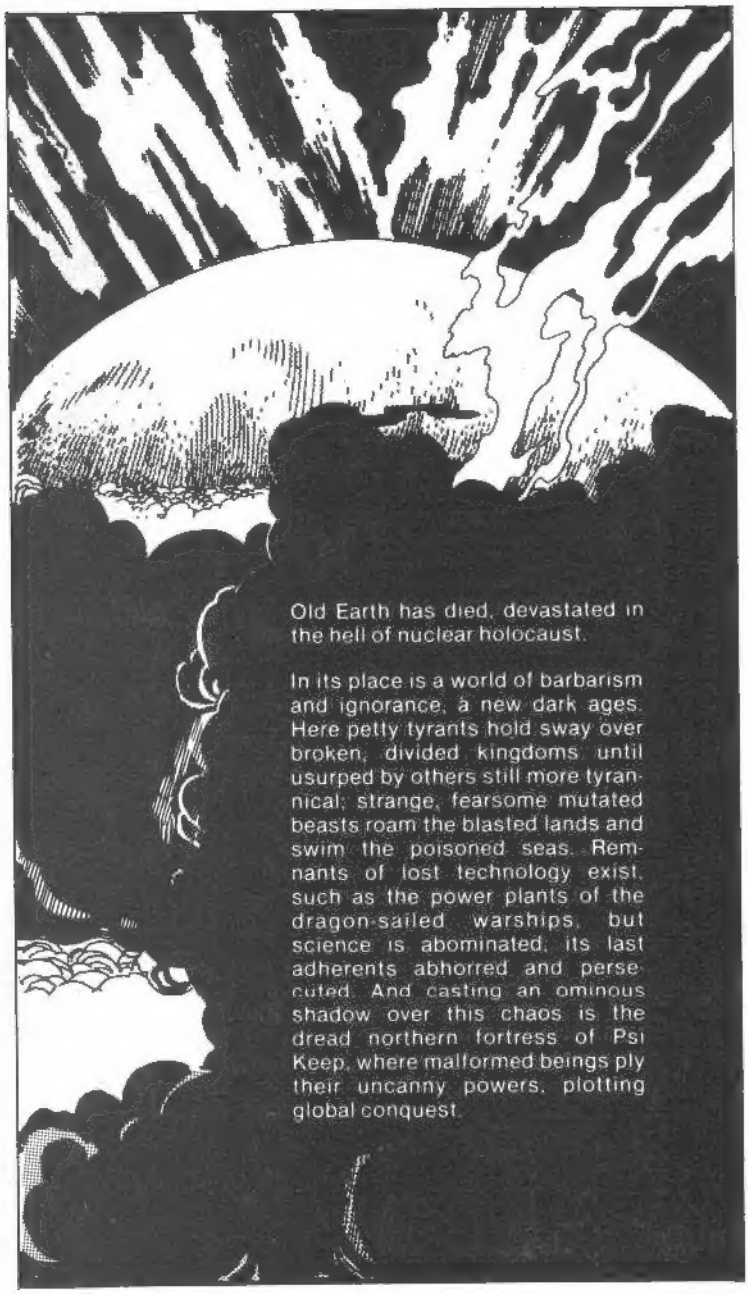


Old Earth has died, devastated in the hell of nuclear holocaust.

In its place is a world of barbarism and ignorance, a new dark ages. Here petty tyrants hold sway over broken, divided kingdoms until usurped by others still more tyrannical; strange, fearsome mutated beasts roam the blasted lands and swim the poisoned seas. Remnants of lost technology exist, such as the power plants of the dragon-sailed warships, but science is abominated, its last adherents abhorred and persecuted. And casting an ominous shadow over this chaos is the dread northern fortress of Psi Keep, where malformed beings ply their uncanny powers, plotting global conquest.

Men call this New Earth, but it is a world in its twilight hours, a planet in its death throes.

Such is the dream of Amarix of the Westlands. But New Earth is cruel to dreamers and saviors. For attempting to revive the science of old, King Amarix is cast out by the subjects he hoped to save and hounded toward waiting death on the dread Demon Waste. But through the science his pursuers call black sorcery, the seed of Amarix's knowledge and dreams is passed on to be reborn in the son of a peasant. Passed on to a boy who later must watch his father slain and his mother ravished and murdered by an unknown Warlord. Passed on to one who grows to manhood consumed with a lust for revenge, yet driven by the haunting heritage of a King he never knew.

The shattering clash of broadswords rang through the night above the pounding of the waves. For two hours the two men had dueled, white-hot sparks bursting into the moonless darkness each time steel crossed, their armor streaked with highlights of reflected fire from the many torches held aloft by stony-faced watchers thronging the surrounding rocks.

Now it was ended. With a mighty double-handed stroke, Reynard of the Commonlands sent his opponent, Smythe of the Southern Isles, arcing back into the foaming broil of the surf, his battle helmet a slivered wreck, his face a gaping wound.

Smythe cried with pain as his wounded face touched the salt water. The shriek ended with a choking rasp as Reynard's arm, hard and sinewy beneath chain mail, locked around his neck, hauling him up.

Then it is settled? When we assemble before the young barbarian, I will be the spokesman?

The words were phrased as questions, but the harsh, deadly tone of Reynard's voice was a warrior unparalleled at the peak of his powers, and a force to be reckoned with in New Earth. Others, like the man sagging in Reynard's grip, had come to swear loyalty to the wild upstart who ruled this coast. Blackmark, who, in less than a year had tripled the size of a kingdom he'd ripped from the hands of another, now spoke of unifying a torn world. Others were fools. Reynard was not.

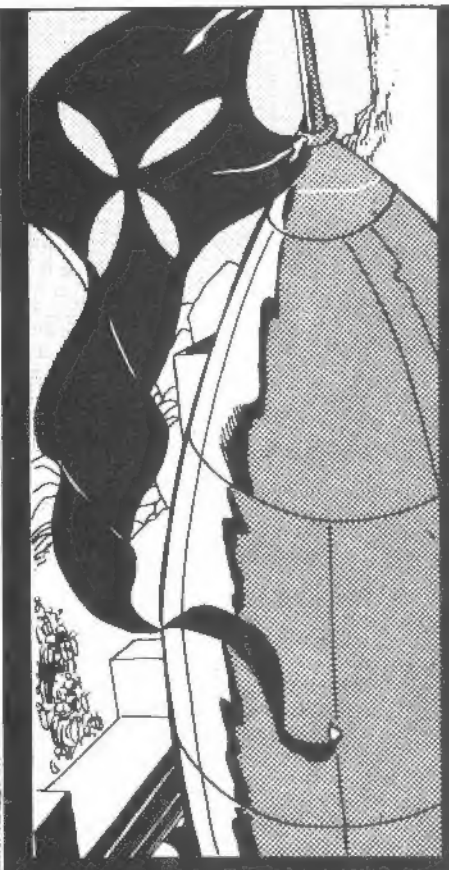
And when I speak, it will be to tell this Blackmark, that the Lords of New Earth do not grovel before every slave and malcontent who succeeds at revolt and plays at being king.

Unless, of course, my point of view is still not shared?

Reynard felt the stares of the shadowy figures above him and could almost read their thoughts. They had come from many places, many lands, these Warlords. Some with hope, some with curiosity, some with defiance. In the end, they broke into two factions, Smythe championing one, Reynard the other. Now from the silence, Reynard knew they would abide by the combat. He let his swordpoint dig deeper into the flesh of Smythe's neck...

And in the morning, with the first glint of the sun's rays casting a bright glow on highly polished dress armor, the companies of the gathered Lords wheeled their chargermutes inland and rode toward the castle of the man who had been slave and thief, outlaw and mercenary... And hoped to unite the Earth.

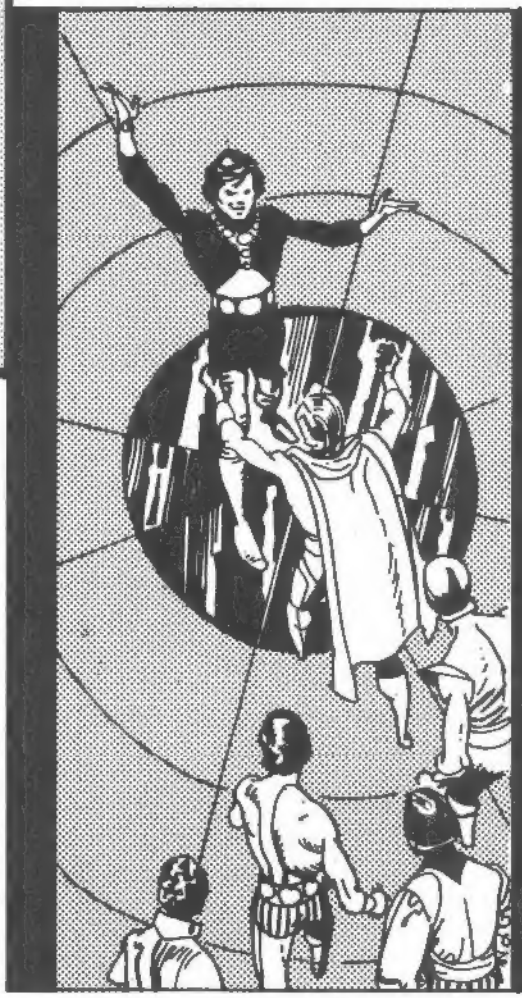
By midday, the column of armored warriors and mutant steeds approached the massive ramparts of Silvertower. This was the name Blackmark gave the castle after inspiring his fellow slaves into uprising and pinioning the former owner, King Kargon, to his own throne with a mighty sword-thrust. Bright sunlight picked out the gleaming spire from which the name was derived, and the sight of it filled many of the riders with unease.



This was not an integral part of the castle, but a separate structure unto itself. Some said it was a Warlock's shrine, others that it was a pre-holocaust craft designed to pierce the heavens. All knew the ancient legend, existing since before Kargon's time, that he who could move it from its earthly prison would someday be king of the world. And all had heard of that fateful day when the young barbarian, under sentence of death and taunted by mocking laughter, had stepped inside the demon structure and sent it roaring into the sky.

From within the needle spire, the man who inspired this doubt watched thoughtfully as the column moved through his gates. Blackmark studied each Warlord carefully as he passed, and wondered which one he would have to kill.

Moments later, clad in jet and silver, Blackmark stood in the castle's great hall, greeting his visitors. His own hard tawny eyes locked with those of every man he faced, searching, even while he went through the boisterous shouting and shoulder-clapping that served for protocol among the Lords of New Earth. Early in his outlaw days, Blackmark had learned that leadership had to be constantly rewon and reproven. The strength of his reputation had brought these men before him, but before they'd listen or accept what he proposed, there'd have to be a challenge.



Then his gaze met Reynard's. And in the ice-cold stare of the Lord of the Commonland's pale blue eyes, Blackmark knew he'd found his man.

The gathered visitors adjourned to the banquet chamber and the feast spread before them there. The afternoon was given over to revelling, loud and unrestrained. Through it all, Blackmark carefully paced his intake of wine and, behind an air of easy casualness, studied Reynard. He was impressed to note that the veteran Warlord was doing exactly the same.

The time for toasting came, and after the traditional drinking to the health of the host, Blackmark rose.

I've asked you here to swear an oath with me... An oath of unity. For in unity lies the future of New Earth. As petty divided kingdoms, we will fall.

I stand now for New Earth! Let all those who would follow me, rise... And drink!

There was an uncomfortable stirring and shifting around the huge table. There was coughing and throat clearing. Gradually, as Blackmark knew it would happen, every eye at the table began to shift nervously in Reynard's direction. Only the Lord of the Commonland's frosty gaze remained unwavering. And it was fixed on Blackmark.

Apparently, Lord Reynard, the company accords you the honor of being first to stand and swear. No need for false modesty from a warrior such as yourself.

Rise, sir..... And toast!

"It's amusing to watch a slave prance and perform in what he thinks is a noble's manner, Blackmark. But like any ill-bred puppy left to play overlong you go too far . . ."

And must be whipped!

The sound of the thrown goblet slamming into a corner echoed off the stone like an explosion amid the quiet that gripped the hall. No one looked or noticed. Every eye had now swung back to Blackmark.

I'd loan you a lash that you might try, Lord Reynard, but the last one at Silvertower was buried when we slaves revolted. It was still knotted around its wielder's neck at the time!

But if you'd care to make do with your blade...?

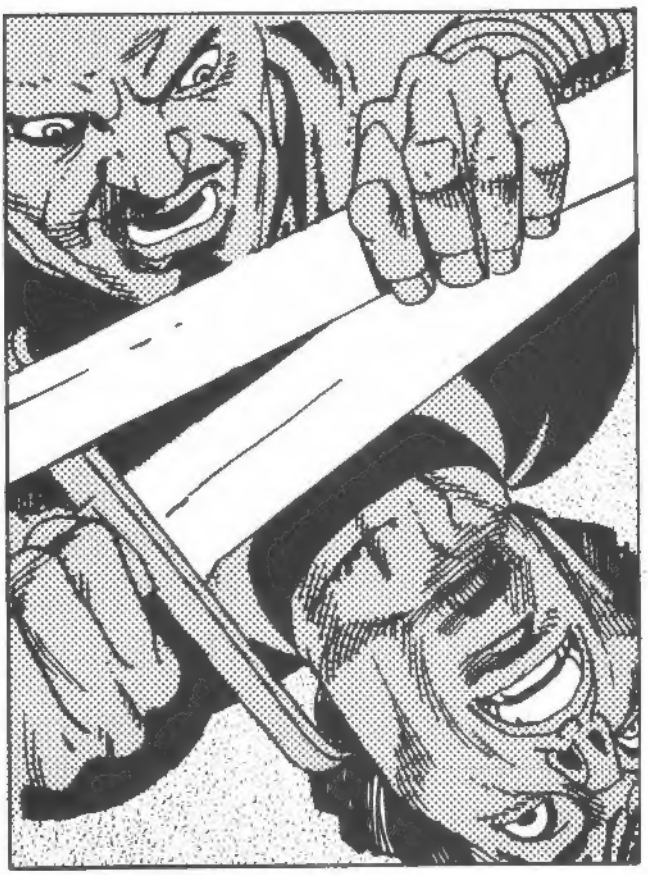
They say you wield the demon sword of the Wizard-king, Amarix. Pray its magic is strong, slave... You'll need it all!

Its cutting edge is enough, Reynard.... Provided you test it with more than words!

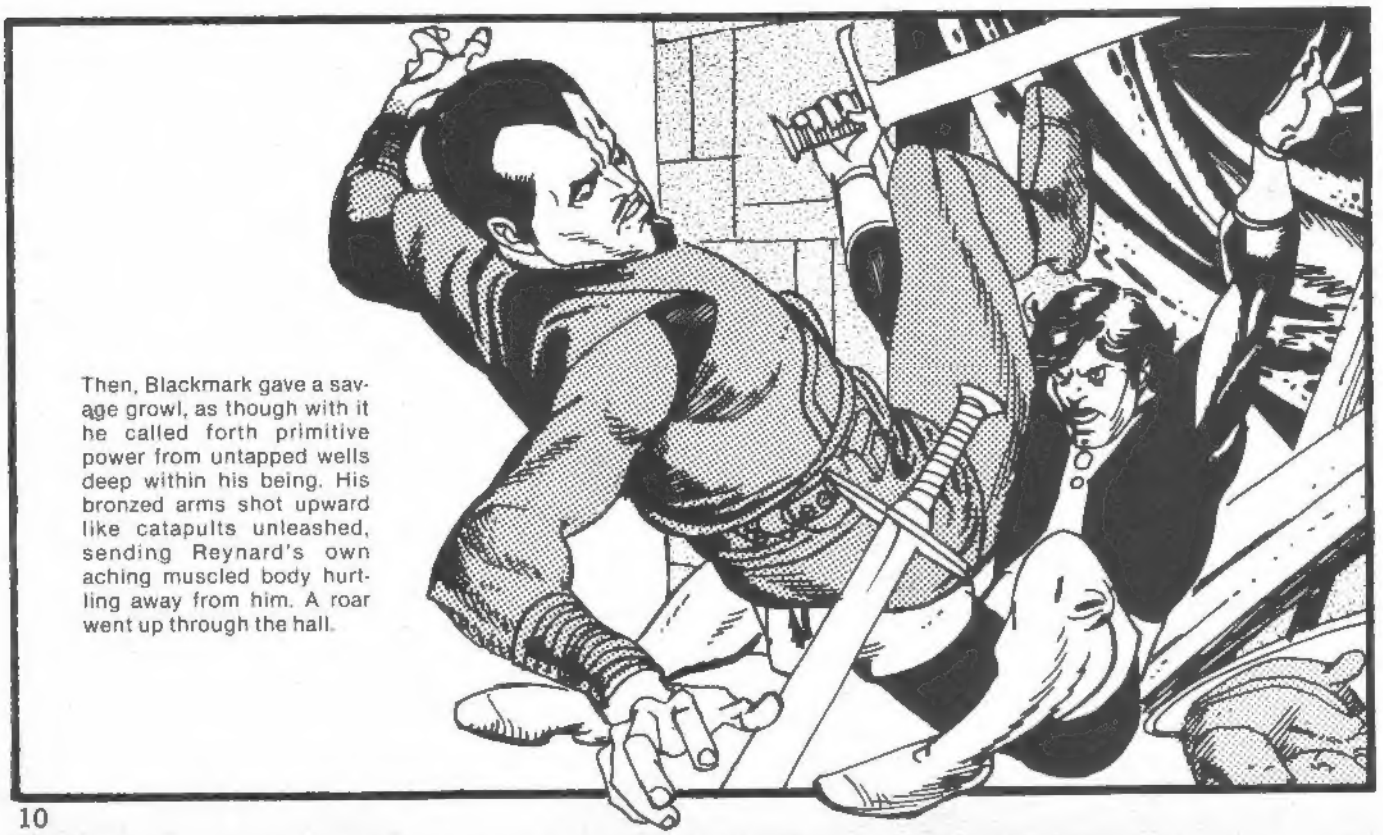
Instantly, Reynard was on his feet. Blackmark moved clear of the table to meet him. Both men were nearly equal in size. If the lean-muscled master of Silvertower's lion-maned head rose an inch or two above his opponent's, the Lord of the Commonlands' torso seemed broader, more powerful. Yet, it was not the strength of Reynard's frame that concerned Blackmark, but the chain mail that covered it. With only cloth over his sinewy form, Blackmark knew he would be far more vulnerable. Yet the moment for proving himself was at hand. To delay it might mean to lose it.

With a roar, Reynard sprang across the distance separating him from Blackmark. As he leaped, his arms, corded with muscle from years of handling battleax and mace, broadsword and lance, in combats beyond counting, sent his blade ripping through the air in a deadly unbreaking arc that would end in Blackmark's breast.

The hall rang with steel against steel as Blackmark's own sword swung speedily forward in time to catch the blow. But the impact sent the younger man staggering. Like a blacksmith at his anvil, Reynard pounded home stroke after hammering stroke, driving his off-balanced opponent backward, until Blackmark went sprawling to the cold stone floor. And Reynard's relentless blade arced again....



Blackmark blocked the stroke inches from his throat, and the sword hilts locked. The Warlord slammed his full bulk against Blackmark, using weight and gravity to drive the blades into the younger man's jugular. A crimson line was drawn across Blackmark's trembling Adam's apple. He pushed back, veins in his straining arms standing out like vines twining columns of marble. For seconds that seemed eternities, as both men shook with the effort, the deadlock held.

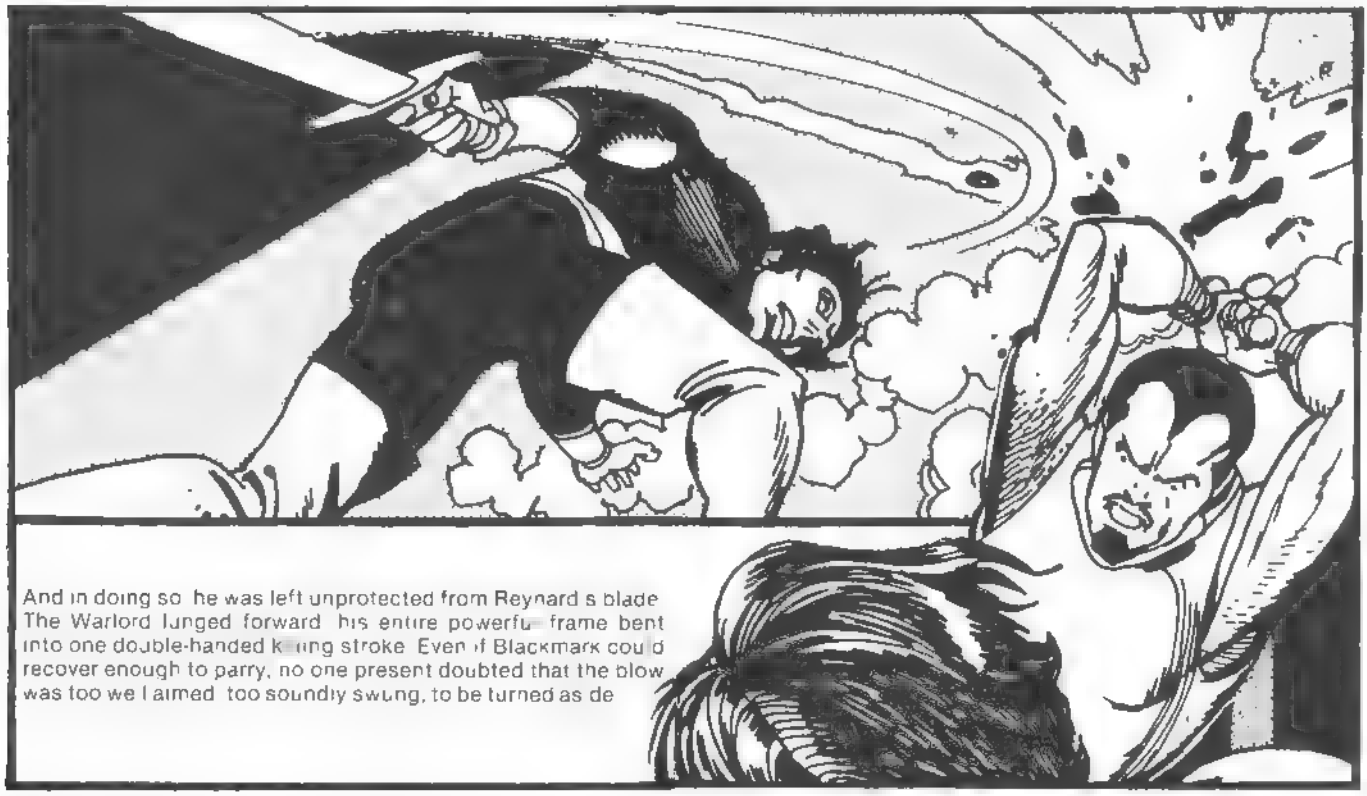


Then, Blackmark gave a savage growl, as though with it he called forth primitive power from untapped wells deep within his being. His bronzed arms shot upward like catapults unleashed, sending Reynard's own aching muscled body hurtling away from him. A roar went up through the hall.

Reynard regained his balance but the advantage was long lost Aga n and again, Blackmark s blade darted at him like a s ver serpent, and the chain mail that had we ghed so heavily n reality, further handi capped his tired arms as they tried to parry the attack Every man gathered now rea ized B ackmark had intent onally baited the Lord of the Common ands nto expending his strength early And none rea zed it more than Reynard

But Reynard was a survivor If one path would not lead him to victory, any other would do His free hand ashed out desperately to the wall behind him, and the torch that hung there
Flame and oily smoke trailed the air as he ripped it from ts holder and sent it hurtling toward Blackmark's face

With catlike swiftness B ackmark caught himself mid-stride and dodged back Revers ng his swordstrike with lightning speed he struck aside the flam ng brand explod.ng it into points of f re



And in doing so he was left unprotected from Reynard s blade The Warlord lunged forward his entire powerfu frame bent into one double-handed k ing stroke Even if Blackmark could recover enough to parry, no one present doubted that the blow was too we l aimed too soundly swung, to be turned as de

But when as Reynard struck, Blackmark was moving, his tawny eyes ablaze with ferocious light at the Warlord's treachery. Though he'd vowed not to earlier, rage made Blackmark edge forward a stud on his sword's ornate hilt. And in that instant, the blade touched Reynard's in what would have been a futile parry
Instead, the air was split by a banshee wail and hellfire seemed to flare from where the blades met
Now a pulsing, unearthly power seized Blackmark, turning him from a reasoned fighter into a beserk engine of destruction. And the sword he wielded did a mad dance through the air and sang of blood and death
There were no skills, no devices left Reynard against the killing machine Blackmark had become. The screaming silver sword battered through every defense, every feint or parry until it tore the Commonlander's blade from his grasp then in a murderous backstroke, slammed flatly into Reynard himself. The Warlord was lifted into the air and driven crashing into a huge oaken table, screaming as beneath his chainmail muscle and ligament tore and ripped.
But one look at the murderous glow flaring in Blackmark's eyes as he advanced, tightly gripping the crackling whining blade, told everyone that Reynard's pain would be short lived

Every fibre of Blackmark's being seemed to throb with the sword's lashing sonic power as he advanced. Yet even as the ancient science gripped him, drawing him to the kill, he sensed a terrible quiet in the hall. The awesome silence of men gripped by fear beyond understanding.

All science appeared as sorcery to these Lords of New Earth, and the sword's wild power must seem like the blackest, most hell-spawned of all. This was not the way Blackmark had meant for it to be. For Reynard, to be destroyed by its pulsing steel, would only divide them further, make them fear him as a witch-warrior, and cost him the very unity for which he strived. With all his might, Blackmark fought the sword's throbbing force, struggling to move the power stud back to its off position, wondering what would happen if the day ever came when he used it at more than half its potential. And was suddenly touched by the cold hand of fear.

Then the moment passed, and Blackmark felt himself in control again. He sheathed the blade and watched as an ashen faced Reynard rose.

We've left a flask or two unbroken, my lord! Wine's better used for toasting than spilling. Will you drink?

The warrior from the Commonlands stared silently, unbelievingly at the man who should have killed him, his pain wracked body still heaving from the efforts of the battle. Then his eyes glinted strangely and he took a goblet.

To your dream then, Blackmark. To one world undivided.

And with Reynard's hoarse whispered words, unity came, however slender, however tenuous, among the Lords of New Earth.

When the celebrating ceased, and the gathered War lords departed Blackmark stood alone in the deserted ha l, his face a dark brooding mask Footfalls sounded behind h.m Without turning, Blackmark recogn zed the stride of Balzamo, scientist and adviser to him, warlock and demon to many of New Earth

It went well, I thought. Despite using the sword's power.
Well for Amarix, you mean, old friend. Well for the King whose ambitions and memories haunt my mind like Psi Keep's phantoms
But what of me, Balzamo? What of the peasant boy who saw his father bludgeoned to death and his mother raped and slain? Once I thought Amarix's heritage left room for revenge
But when, Balzamo? WHEN?

Many times since he and the young lord first met, conf ned in the slave pens of K ng Kargon Balzamo had heard the same angry words Now as then, though h.s sc ence had transferred the dying Amarix's knowledge and dreams to B ackmark, he had no answer

In the days that followed, Blackmark threw himse f into binding all who had sworn to their pledge, wei.ding their arm es into a force wh ch would f ght as one The sign of the Phoenix banner was seen throughout the land as his power and influence spread

But as h.s tawny eyes reviewed the legions he had brought together, they searched for a Warlord n a he met of ornate b.ack iron searched for the murderer of h s parents And searched n vain

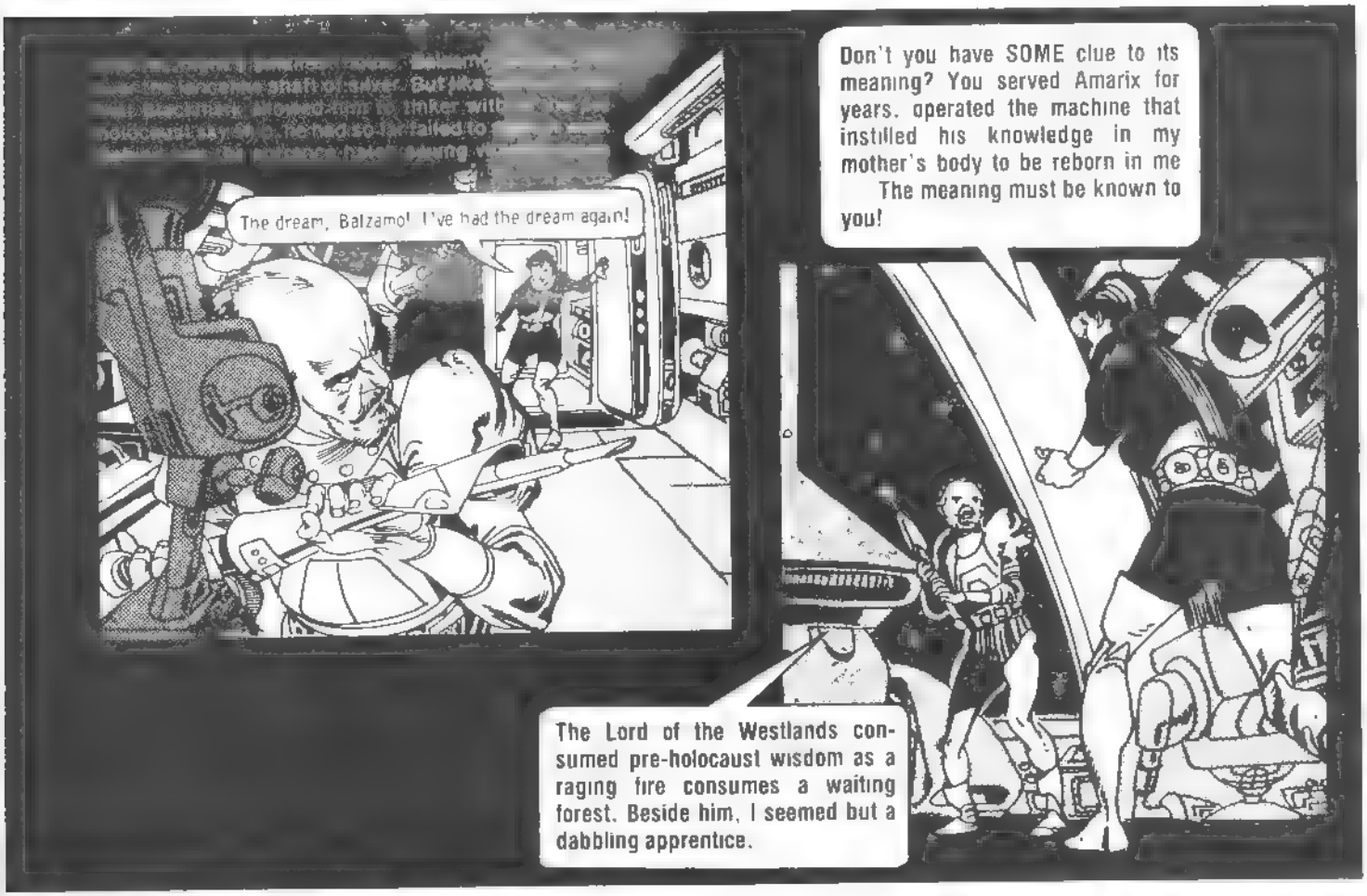
THE SWORD IS THE KEY! BLACKMARK
USE THE SWORD. USE THE SWORD
No.. ! I ve done enough... Let me be! LET ME BE!
THE SWORD, BLACKMARK Turn off its power before you re DESTROYED! We've got to flee or burn with PSI-KEEP!
Balzamo...?

And as the f ickering moment of recognition stayed Blackmark's hand, the old sc entist's f ngers found the blade s control stud

Then the power of the throbbing demon-sword seized him again se zed him as t never had before tearing h m from rea ty and thrust ing him nto a wor d of visions Visions of a King long dead

The city The spires of light! NOT AGAIN I shou d be free of that I ve conquered Ps -Keep I've had my revenge
Damn you Amarix I shou d be FREE

And woke up scream ng as he had every n ght since the Lords of New Earth had drunk the r toast of un ty The furs that had covered Blackmark s naked body against the first dank chil of autumn were strewn on the f oor of h s bed chamber A film of perspirat on covered his lean musc ed body


The dream, Balzamo! I've had the dream again!
Don't you have SOME clue to its meaning? You served Amarix for years. operated the machine that instilled his knowledge in my mother's body to be reborn in me
The meaning must be known to you!
The Lord of the Westlands consumed pre-holocaust wisdom as a raging fire consumes a waiting forest. Beside him, I seemed but a dabbling apprentice.

You're still a scientist, Balzamo! Don't you have, can't you invent, some device to drain my mind of Amarix's haunted visions?

Sometimes, my King, I feel I'm no more than the cheapjack sorcerer the superstitious claim me to be. Here is a pre-holocaust weapon. The ship's supply could arm a sizeable force. But so lost and limited is what remains of Old Earth science, I cannot make it function!

Blackmark sank down tiredly before the ancient craft's control panel, letting his dream-fevered forehead rest against the coolness of the crystal rods and levers that dotted its surface, recalling another day when his bronzed hands had gripped the same instruments and sent the ship lurching into the heavens.

Weeks of studying this ship's mighty engines haven't enabled me to discover how to replenish their power exhausted turbines since the day you made it fly!

Until Amarix's dreams manifest themselves in reality as they have in the past, Blackmark, there is no way I can ease or interpret their maddening challenge.

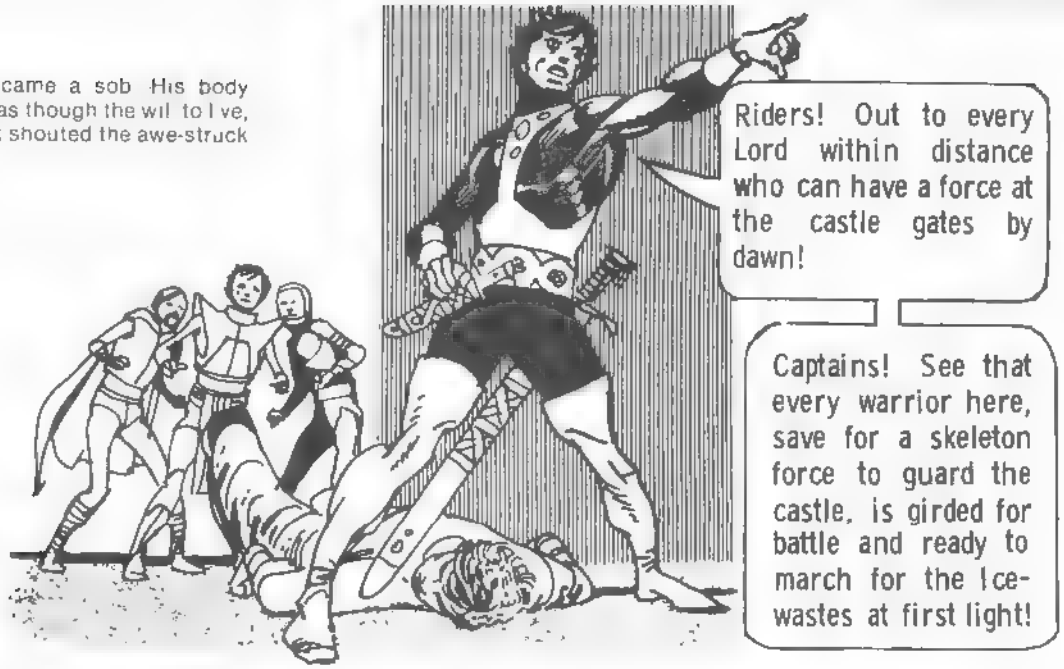
The two men lapsed into grim silence. Outside, the first light of dawn pushed tentatively against the darkness

Miles beyond the ramparts of Silvertower, that same dawn found a rider shipping his mutant steed through the morning mist. The charger-mute's breath came in labored shrieks, and blood and foam flecked its mouth and nostrils. The man in the saddle swayed drunkenly, risking a fall each time he twisted to gaze behind him, wildly searching the horizon for something that never appeared

It was midmorning when the rider, leaving a dying charger-mute in the courtyard behind him, pushed through the huge oaken doors to Silvertower's great hall. He staggered on legs numbed from days in the saddle toward Blackmark's throne, eyes glazed with deep-grained terror, crusted, wind-cracked lips struggling to form one word

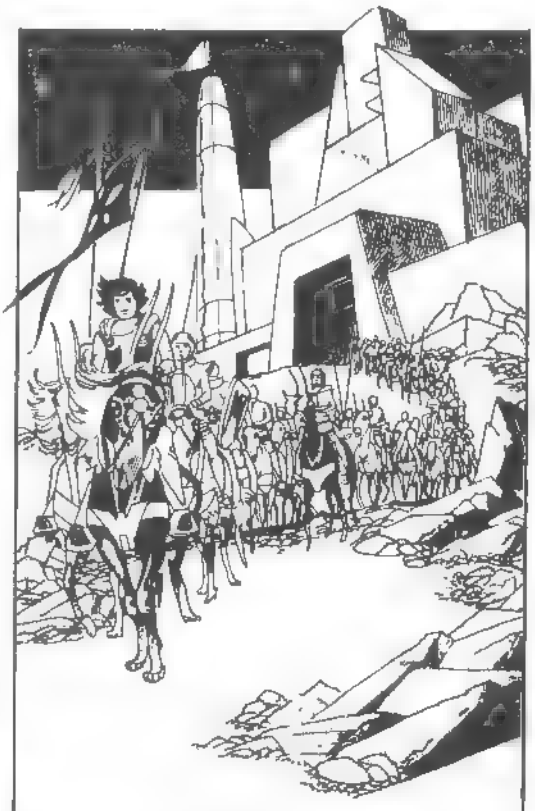
D-Doom, sire... The doom has come! Psi Keep's hordes besiege my Lord's castle!
No axe, no sword can smite them... I rode with the Golden Guard, I saw, I know... Nothing can stop that hellspawned horde..... NOTHING!
I survived, sire, managed to escape... But for how long, HOW LONG? That creeping doom will hunt us all and no man may stop it No man.. No man...

The messenger's words became a sob His body seemed to fo d and co apse as though the wil to l ve, to resist, had fled Blackmark shouted the awe-struck hal back to life


Riders! Out to every Lord within distance who can have a force at the castle gates by dawn!
Captains! See that every warrior here, save for a skeleton force to guard the castle, is girded for battle and ready to march for the Ice-wastes at first light!

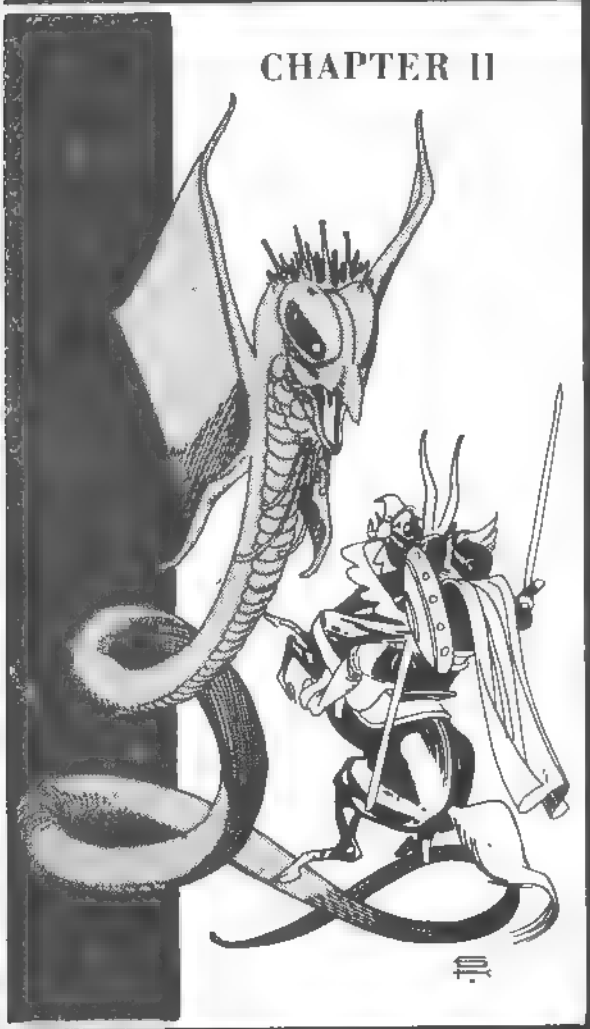
Into the night Sl vertower pulsed w th fe and act v ty The life and activity of men prepar ng for death And whether their own or that of an enemy few among them cared to say or think
Without pause B ackmark moved through the cast e passing a joke here shout ng a rebuke there, keeping the preparations at a frenzied pitch generating a mae-strom of motion with himself as its center

You Captains keep 'em at t another hour. I want every warrior tired enough to sleep instead of ly ng awake think-ing on the nightmare ahead!
Balzamo, old friend I m eaving a troop at your dis posal If your scientific prob ing finds anything that could have bearing on the coming battle, ride like the wind to join us!



But at the end of the road lay the Unknown The first true test of man and mutant was about to beg n and not one r der in that bleak, cold dawn cou d guess ts outcome Not even the tawny-eyed young ord fingered by dest ny, and the wild dream of a long dead King to lead them

CHAPTER II



Far to the north, in the massive mountain fortress that was Psi-Keep, the mutant masters directed the carnage For a winter they had rested, stored their strength, pondering this new power in the world that had tested them on the Icewastes

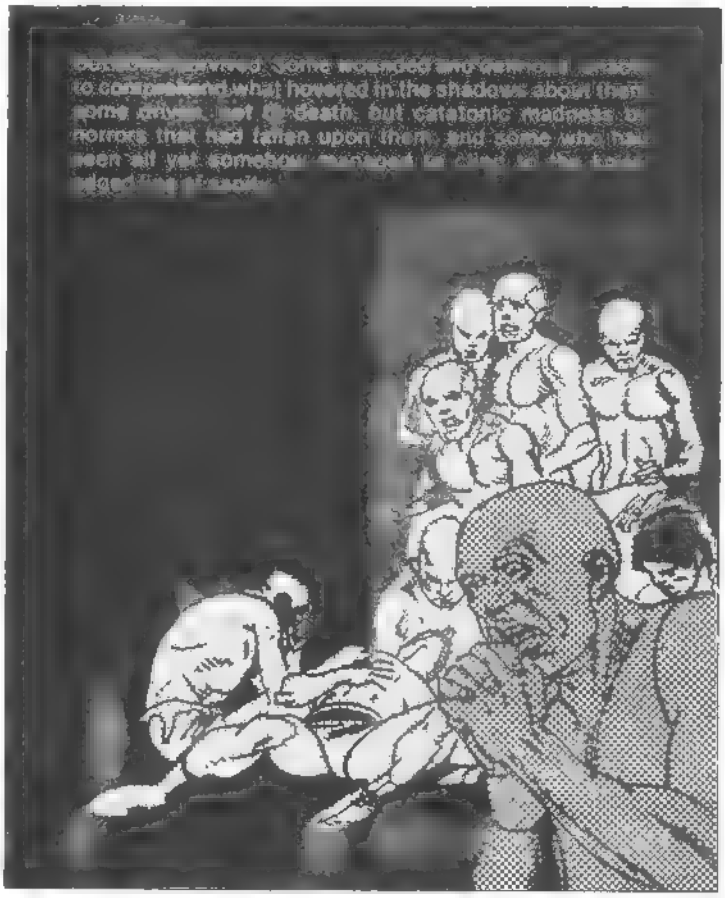
Now the winter was over Psi Keep had raised its vast mental forces for the deathblow at civilization The circle of masters sent forth their nightmare legions with one thought, one goal: Mutant not man, shall rule!

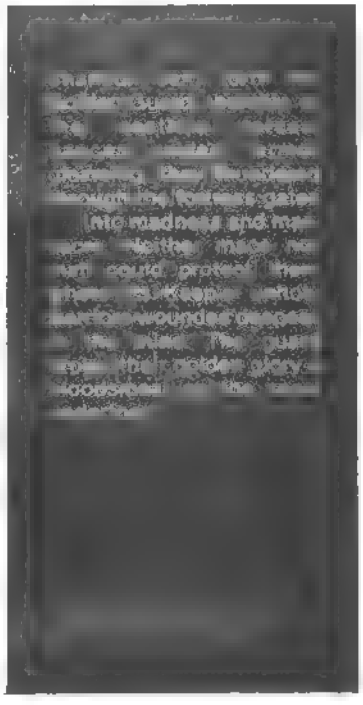
Think of fire Think of ice Think of boiling oil sluicing over crumbling stone, sending giant fingers of flame to claw at the sky above blackened battlements Think of blasting winds from the North sweeping like an icy scythe over dead and dying sprawled on a frozen plain

For this is how it was when Castle Shannux fell

The siege had been short, the toll terrible. What good were ramparts of stone, gates of iron and heavy timber against a living shadow that dropped from the sky like an enveloping cloak? So the dead littered the once proud stronghold, frozen where they had fallen.

Grotesquely posed statues of cold flesh, monuments to the power of Psi-Keep. And the mutant masters' unfeeling hatred of the beings called Man.





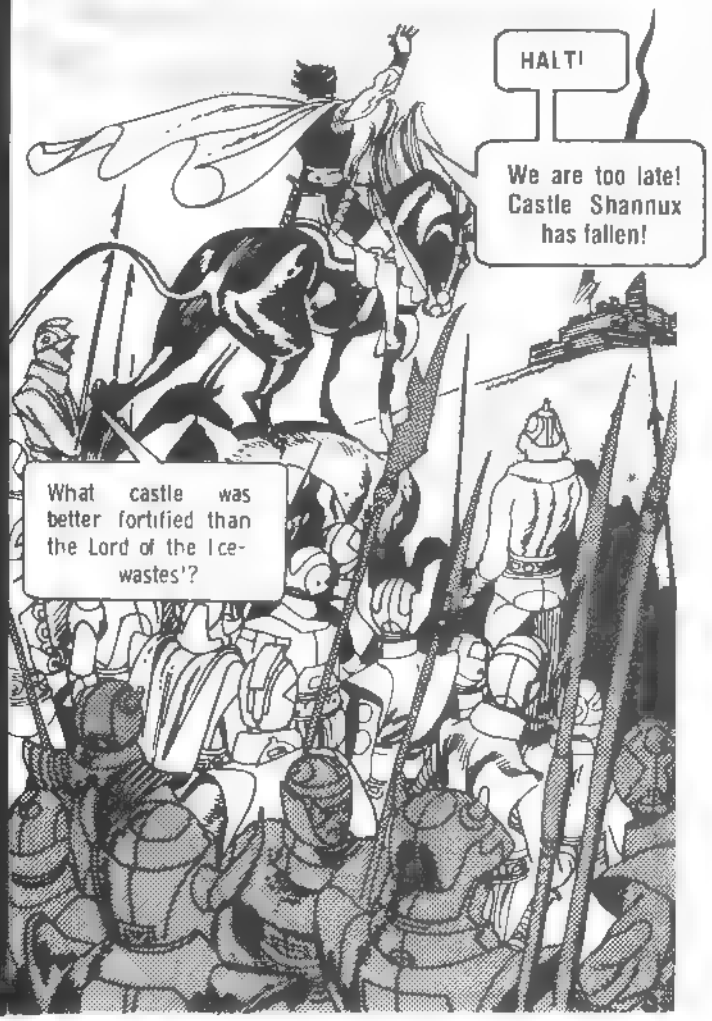
And like some vast starv ng monstrosity that gorged so ely on carnage, the De mon Legion fell on Castle Shannjx

Spring s the season of rebirth And like the crops of toiling farmers like the trees and plants of the wild even like hope Terror can be reborn Fol ow ng the melting snow, the driv ng rains, the Shadow came again larger longer than before trail ng south ward ever southward

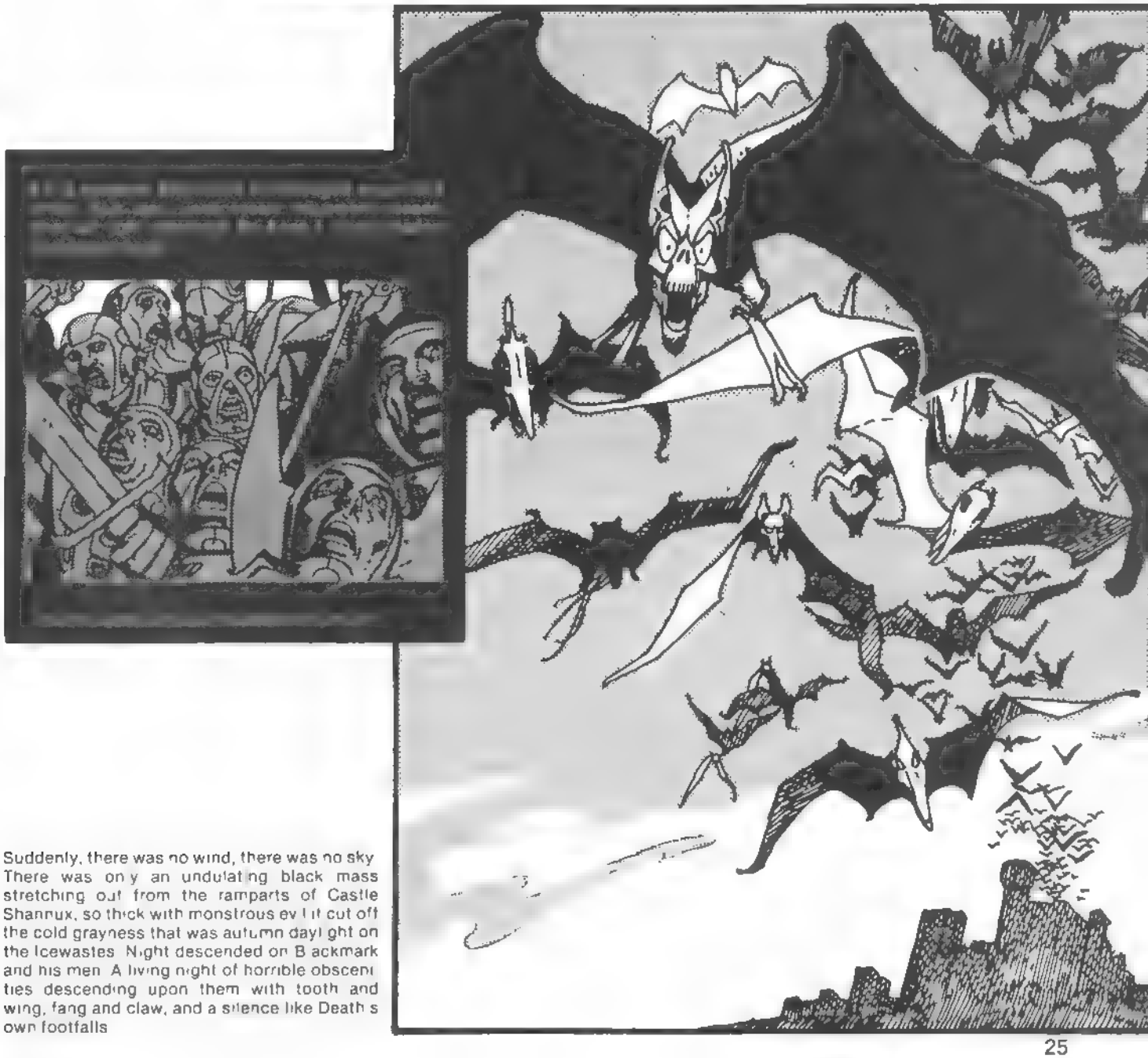
Preceding it, driven like w d beasts or stampeding herds came the people, the survivors, a countrys de n fl ght

But flight offered little hope, almost no escape The demon force that had struck in the Ice-wastes had been like a finger probing The monster tide sweep ng south was a hand flail ing, strik ng in many, in all, direc-tions The people fled Often into madness, or worse

The inferno that had danced across the battlements of Castle Shannux was now a black smudge smeared on a b eak gray sky But a northern wind stil knifed at the castle sending Blackmark's cloak whipping about h m as he s gnaled h s troop to a ha t And the wind carried more than st ng ng cold t bore the stench of death

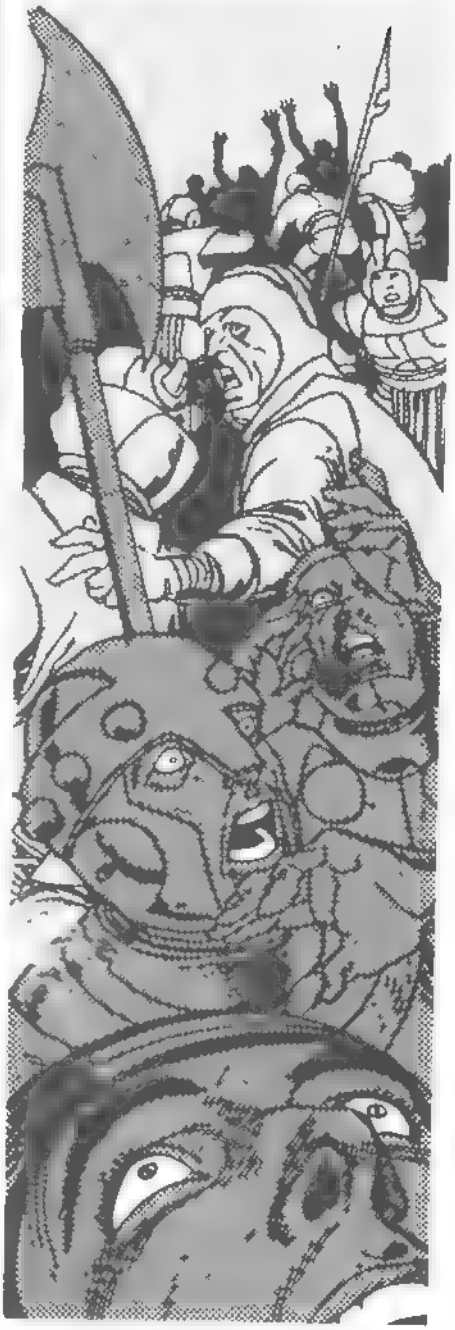


Blackmark's muscle-corded arm brought the silver blade of Amarix flashing from its scabbard. Noise was swelling around him, a desperate murmuring and mumbling, a thousand different prayers to a thousand different gods



Suddenly, there was no wind, there was no sky. There was only an undulating black mass stretching out from the ramparts of Castle Shannux, so thick with monstrous evil it cut off the cold grayness that was autumn daylight on the Icewastes. Night descended on Blackmark and his men. A living night of horrible obscenities descending upon them with tooth and wing, fang and claw, and a silence like Death's own footfalls

The chil air was shattered by the shr eks of men and animals as the de non hor de te like a curse from the heavens Leathery wings beat about Blackmark s head thorny talons tore at his face, his eyes every inch of exposed flesh Sweat and blood sprayed from his body as he hewed at the obscene attackers with a butcher s zest And found he might as well have been thrusting at clouds or the morning m sts!

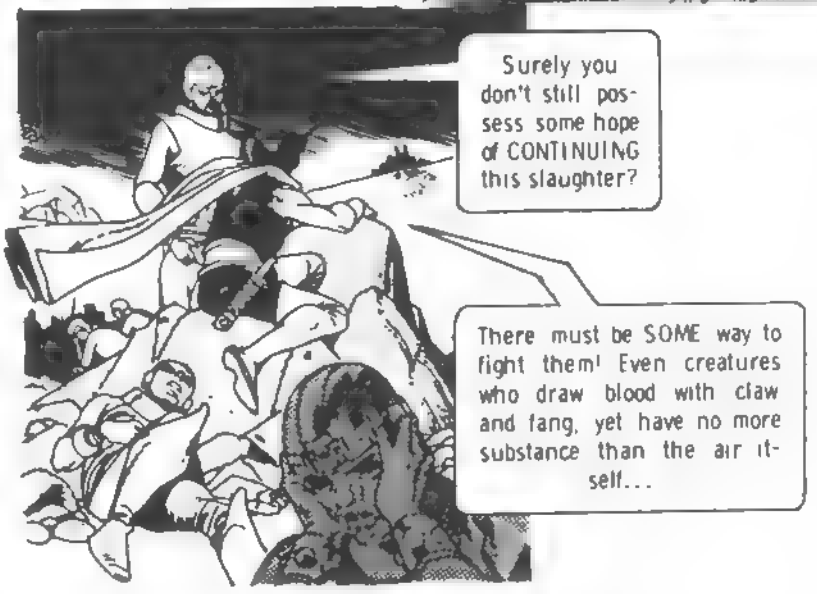


PANIC! Its clawed hand dug nto the minds of men to crush thought to pu p and rip free raw emotion Veteran warriors and seasoned sol diers rolled their eyes skyward looking upon the face of the enemy and went mad

Blackmark stil stood as his a ies died around him His silver blade, weaving a protective circ e about h m, shriek ng its own terrible song of unknown pre-ho ocaust power But the demon-blade of King Amarix drank no blood, drew no wounds from the surrounding mind-creatures

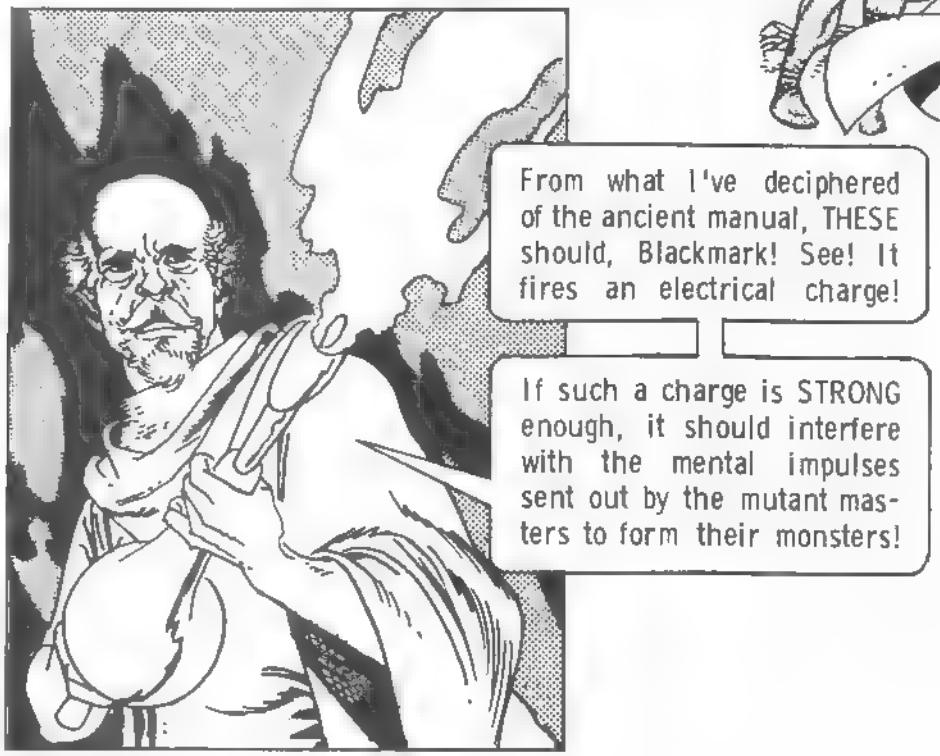
Blackmark fought the urge to madness in his mind the urge to scream, shriek, run wildly blindly to the furthest reaches of the icewastes The control he imparted to himself passed on in a measure to his men The retreat was orderly And the mind creatures of Psi Keep's mutant masters did not follow Remnants from Langlar's forces as well as those of the Twin Lords of the Marsh Country left them sport enough as true night came on

Blackmark found Reynard waiting The Warlord had retreated earlier perhaps too much earlier But it was not a time for either man to make accusations against the other Their troops could neither retreat further nor regroup without rest A bitter night's encampment began

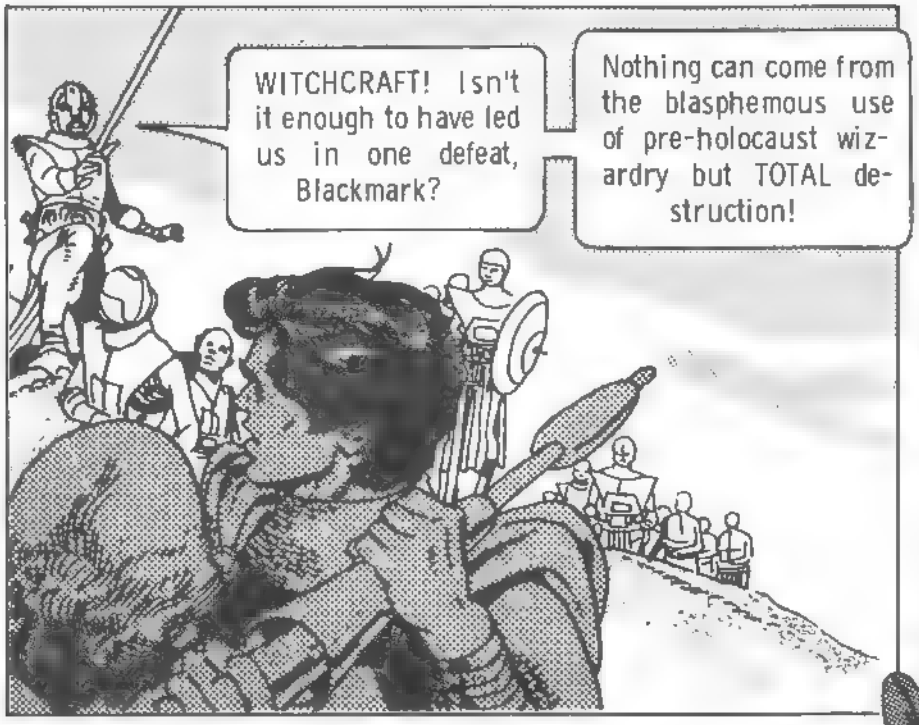

Surely you don't still possess some hope of CONTINUING this slaughter?
There must be SOME way to fight them! Even creatures who draw blood with claw and fang, yet have no more substance than the air itself...

Then a few hours before dawn a cry went up from the sentries Riders appeared
BALZAMO!
My Lord, you said to join you if I discovered anything which might help...

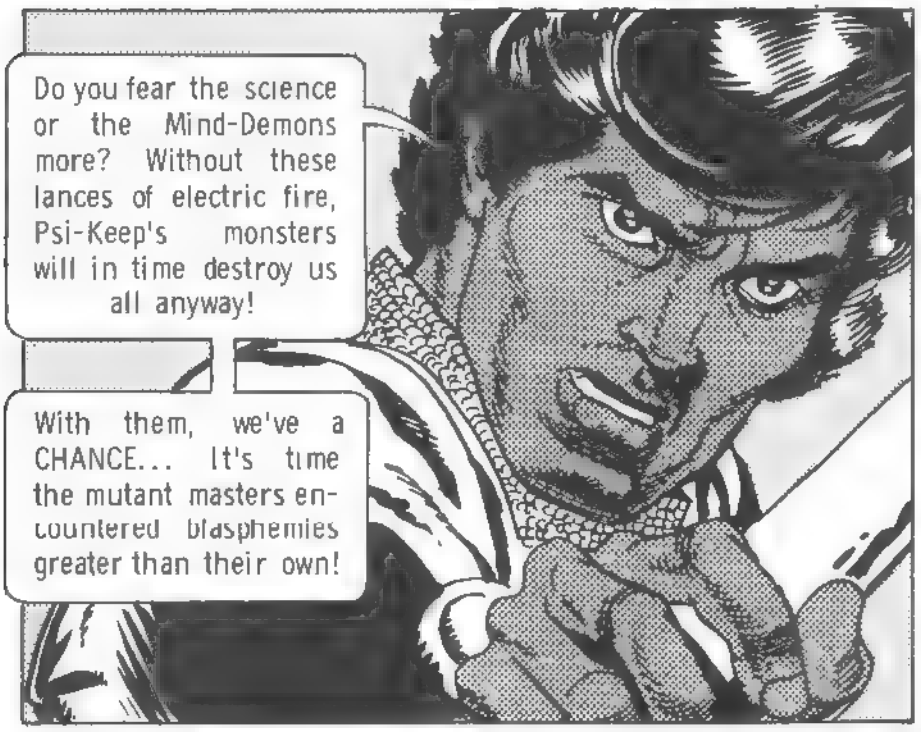
Balzamo signaled the troops who accompanied him Crates were unloaded from the stocky dray-mutes who bore them
My poking and prying about the flying ship has at last borne fruit! Remember the pre-holocaust weapon which so puzzled me? I at last found an ancient manual telling how it works!
But can any weapon have effect against something so nebulous as Psi-Keep's mind-demons?

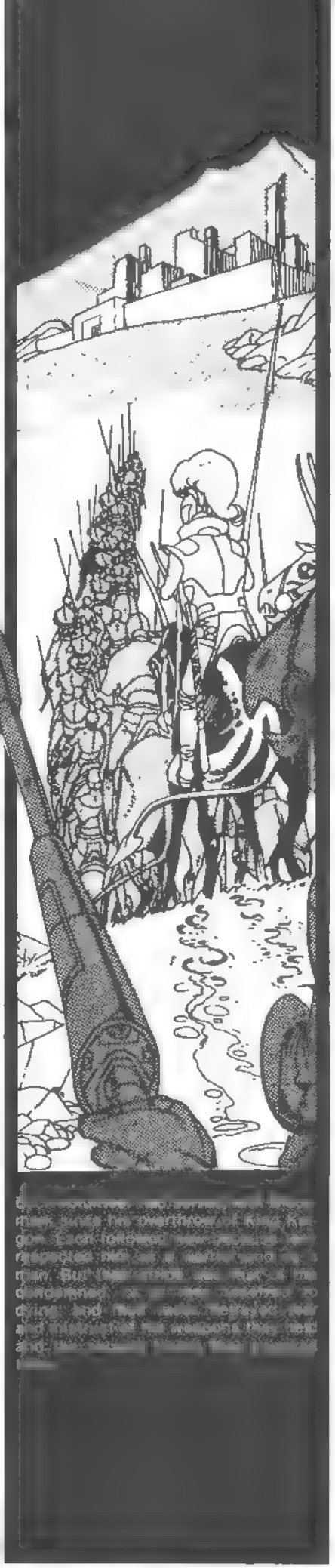

From what I've deciphered of the ancient manual, THESE should, Blackmark! See! It fires an electrical charge!
If such a charge is STRONG enough, it should interfere with the mental impulses sent out by the mutant masters to form their monsters!

A harsh voice cut like a sword stroke into the awed silence wrought by Balzamo's demonstration

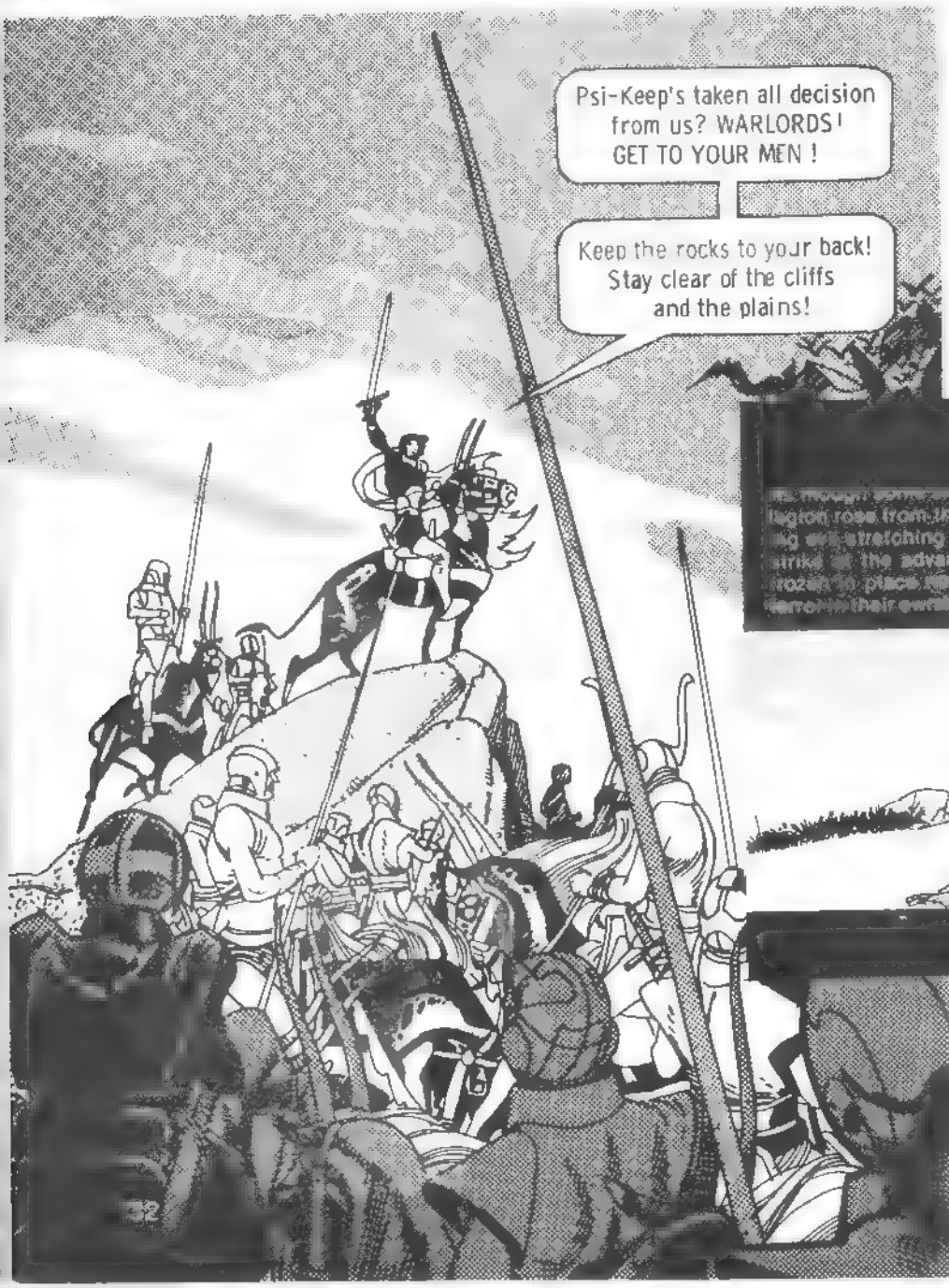

WITCHCRAFT! Isn't it enough to have led us in one defeat, Blackmark?
Nothing can come from the blasphemous use of pre-holocaust wizardry but TOTAL destruction!

Low mutterings of dissent rumbled through the surrounding ranks of soldiers. Reynard's words touched the traditional abomination of science and those who practiced it instilled from the cradle among the men of New Earth.


Do you fear the science or the Mind-Demons more? Without these lances of electric fire, Psi-Keep's monsters will in time destroy us all anyway!
With them, we've a CHANCE... It's time the mutant masters encountered blasphemies greater than their own!



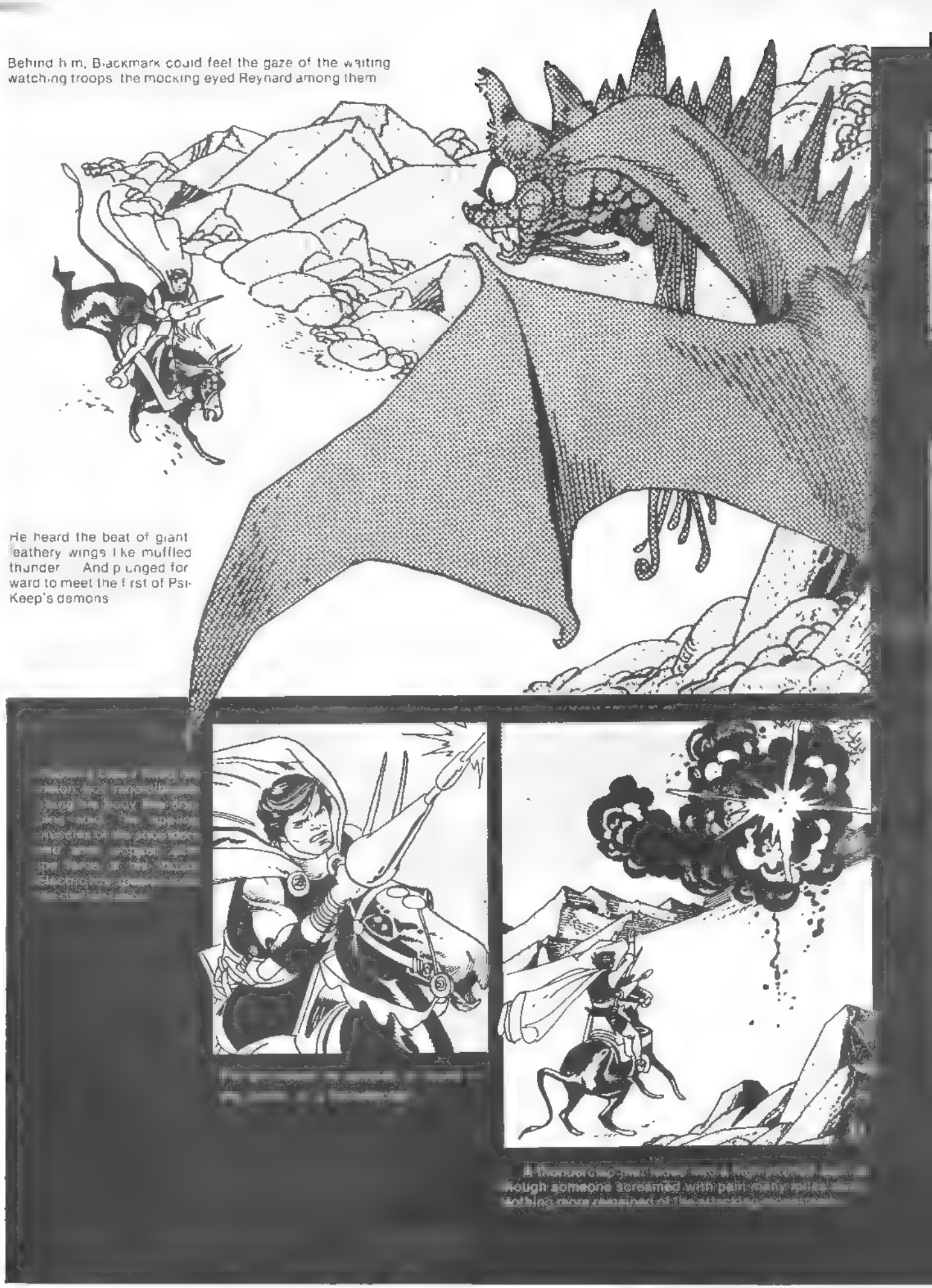
A large force of men doesn't seem to have saved Shannux either, my Lord!
What guarantee have we that OUR legions can stand up to whatever overwhelmed his stronghold?
No battle comes with a guarantee, Reynard! If we're to challenge Psi-Keep's masters, it can only be TOGETHER Not each man cowering in his castle!
I don't cower Blackmark And I don't offer an enemy my neck until sure of my chances! I say vote on withdrawal!
You HAD your vote when you swore the oath of unity and agreed to follow my leadership!
What kind of unity have we forged if we ride off now and perhaps abandon SURVIVORS to that Hell-spawn of—


Psi-Keep's taken all decision from us? WARLORDS! GET TO YOUR MEN !
Keep the rocks to your back! Stay clear of the cliffs and the plains!

Charger mutes snorted and sh ed under their r ders Armor rattled and eather harnesses creaked as an involuntary tremor seemed to surge through the ent re ranks fac ng the onrush ng b ack shadow

Behind h m, Blackmark could feel the gaze of the waiting watching troops the mocking eyed Reynard among them

He heard the beat of giant leathery wings l ke muffled thunder And p unged for ward to meet the f rst of Psi-Keep's demons



Blackmark whirled to the motionless line of lancers behind him

Don t stand gap ng like virg ns at a stud farm! You each hold the same power n your own two hands USE IT!
TAKE THE BATTLE TO THE HE SPAWN!

For the space of a heartbeat, the volunteers stared as Blackmark charged forward nto the descending maelstrom of Psi Keep's mind demons Then they were with him feet pounding on the frozen ground electric lances thrust aloft, and vo ces pierc ng the cold thin air with the Westlands battle cry

And t made Blackmark a hero once more He l stened to the cheers and allowed h mself a smile Two batt es had been won on the cy p a n One aga nst the ma gnant menta force of the mutant masters another aga nst the crippling superst tion that kept men weak n the dead y always warr ng world that was New Earth. So Blackmark sm ed

The carnage and slaughter that had marked the initial encounter with Psi-Keep's demon legion prepared Blackmark for what he would find w thin Castle Shannux He was pre pared to find death, to wa k past the mang ed, the disembow ed, strewn through courtyard and hall He was prepared to find life, to swing open dungeon doors and face the gib berers, the prematurely-aged, and those who would stare forever yet never again truly see

But nothing prepared him to expect MORE Nothing prepared Black mark to throw light into the dun geon shadows and find BEAUTY

She was Shandra daughter of Lord Shannux Her beauty was sweeping, dazzling, yet touched with a coldness a strangeness not unlike the Icewastes itself, which she now ruled

Finding such beauty after wading in horror and death made Blackmark forget for a moment the haunting dreams and visions of King Amarix, let him set aside for an instant the ever nagging lust for revenge Instead Blackmark looked on Shandra and remembered he was young, despite having experienced a dozen men's lifetimes in danger and hardship He remembered he had known many women, but had never known love

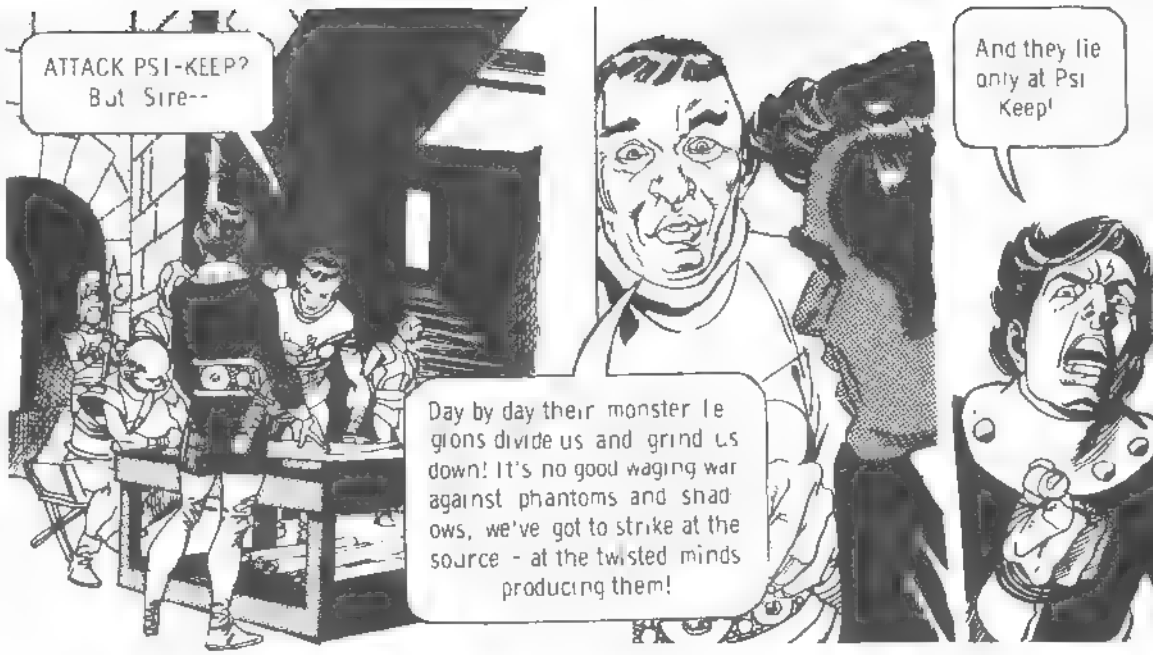
Thank the Gods, my Lord! It seemed we were all doomed, it--
If only we could have saved your father as well, my Lady! But we will work to restore Castle Shannux to the proud state it was before Psi-Keep's hellspawn descended!

When the Spr ng thaw came and B ackmark ed his troops home Shandra rode al h s side In the great ha of S verlower they were married Nob es and common men a ke flocked to the cast e in num- bers not seen since the days of Kargon's games Lad es ta ked of how finely matched the pa r seemed War ords spoke of the greater unity the marr age would br ng to the Northern frontiers but a present v ewed the ceremony with nteres

Each day B ackmark received the reports Each day he lost h mself ponder ng new plans, new strateg es His lancers, with their staffs of electric fire were spread too th n They moved from one keep or kingdom to another, ga n ng here a victory there a stalemate but unable to keep up with the ever strik ng demon horde

Worse than the neglect for Shandra were the dreams. Their unnatural recurrence, their terrible significance to Blackmark puzzled and alarmed her simple Northern sensibilities. Her shyness and hesitancy to speak only compounded the agony caused by the dreams and, in time, the dreamer

The gulf between the young couple widened But Blackmark was possessed so ely by his twin demons, the haunting visions of Amarix and the rea life nightmare of Ps-Keep, and oblivious to all e se Yet from h.s preoccupation and obsession h s stud es of charts and findings of his scouts, his long consultat ons with Bal zamo a decision grew


ATTACK PSI-KEEP? But Sire--
Day by day their monster le gions divide us and grind us down! It's no good waging war against phantoms and shad ows, we've got to strike at the source - at the twisted minds producing them!
And they lie only at Psi Keep!

Blackmark turned away from the assembled Warlords before they could question or argue

Time is on the mutants' side. If we delay, our strength wanes and the moment passes. Every warrior we can spare, every ship we have available, must be ready by the end of the month!
That means working day and night, my Lord! We're already severely pressed. You yourself—
I didn't say it would be easy I said it must be done!

A unde Blackmark s re ent les goad ng it was done By month s end the Westland's harbor was fil ed with warships flying a dozen different em b ems Fight ng men from every Lord Who d n a legiance boa d th he night t de bega to And B ackmar n fu battle dress, ran thro th ver wer s ha s shout ng

My lady, .t is time.. !

Shandra? We're sailing now! SHANDRA? Where are you?

Shandra! Why haven't you an--

The chamber was as empty as the th gh wh ch he had rai bu the answer was there

Deep within him, Blackmark sensed what the note wou d say even as h s f ngers darted for it

Stil , they trembled sl ghtly as he lifted the folded paper

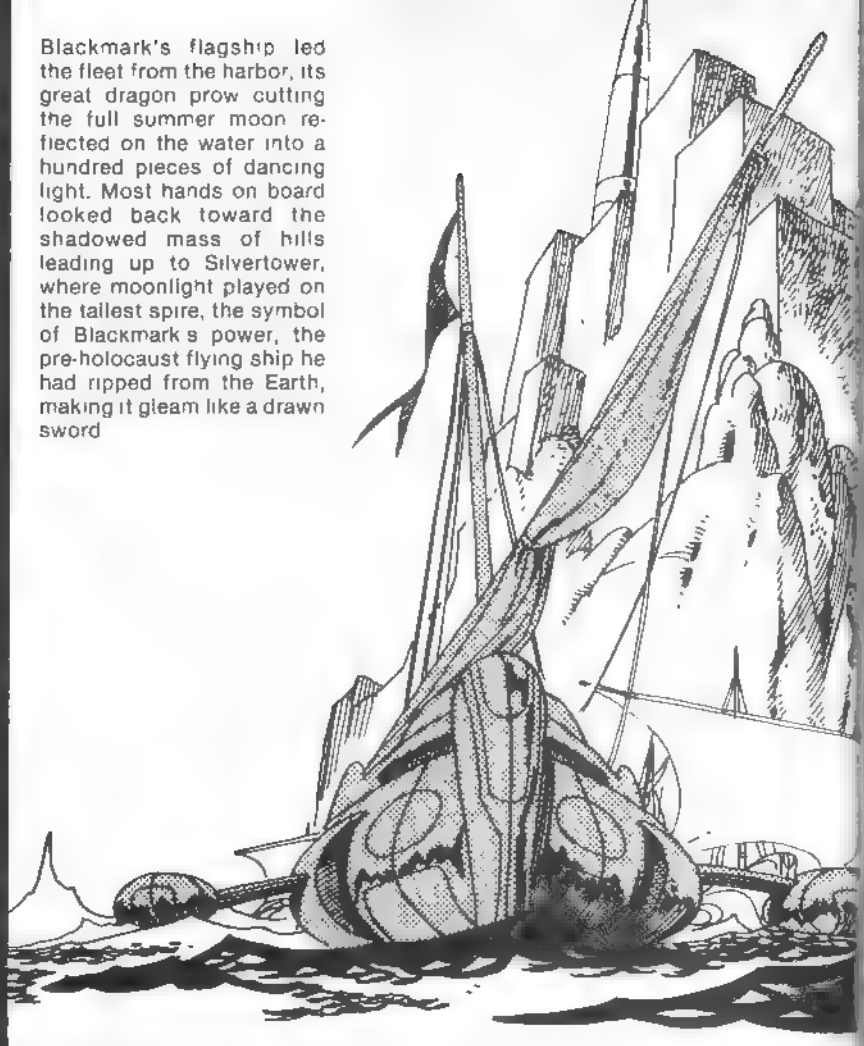
His tawny eyes were cold and distant as they stared at the delicate, hesitant script, yet he read it through again and again as though hoping to find some hint, some subtle new interpretation, that it was a mistake a misunderstanding

But each time it was the same Shandra had left with Reynard of the Commonlands She did not want him to follow

Sire, the Warlords sent me from the harbor. The tide is running out. They want to know if you wish to delay the sailing.
No. We'll sail now...

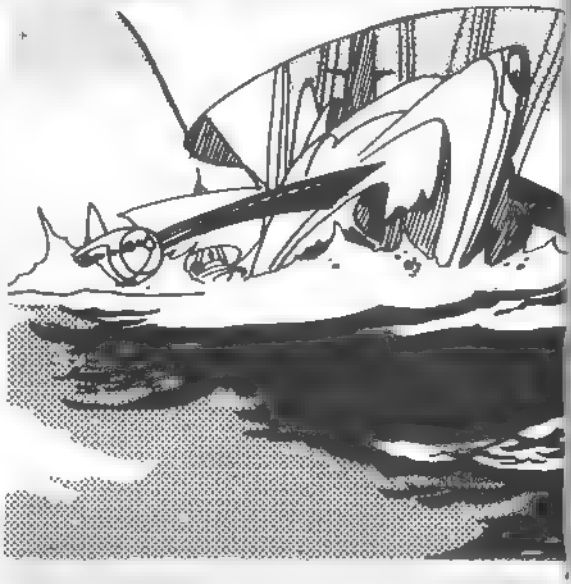
CHAPTER III

Blackmark's flagship led the fleet from the harbor, its great dragon prow cutting the full summer moon reflected on the water into a hundred pieces of dancing light. Most hands on board looked back toward the shadowed mass of hills leading up to Silvertower, where moonlight played on the tallest spire, the symbol of Blackmark s power, the pre-holocaust flying ship he had ripped from the Earth, making it gleam like a drawn sword



But Blackmark did not look back His eyes peered out unwaveringly to the night-black sea ahead

Once into the open water, the warships could use the power plants left since pre-holocaust times in their holds, instead of the sails and oars necessary for maneuvering in the complex tides and currents close to shore And under the energy of these strangely glowing, half-understood engines, Blackmark s fleet forged northward .

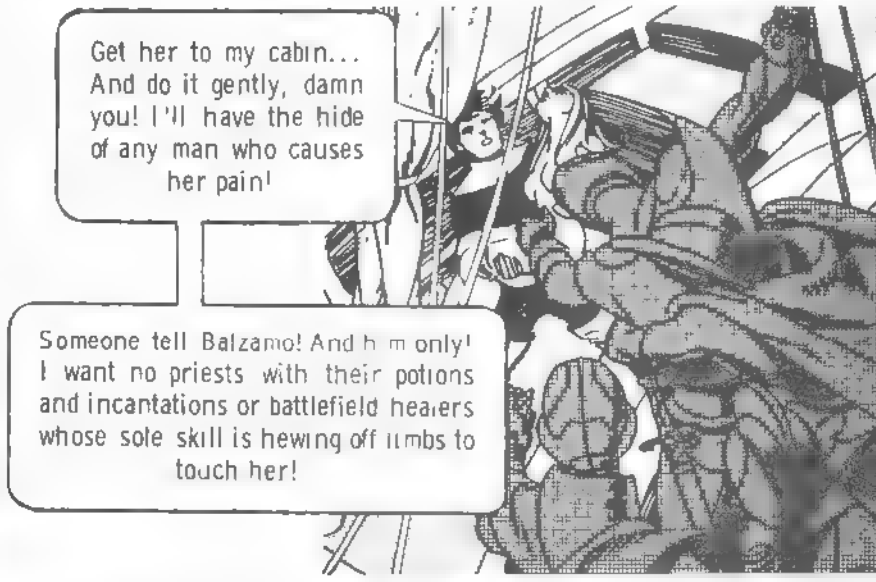


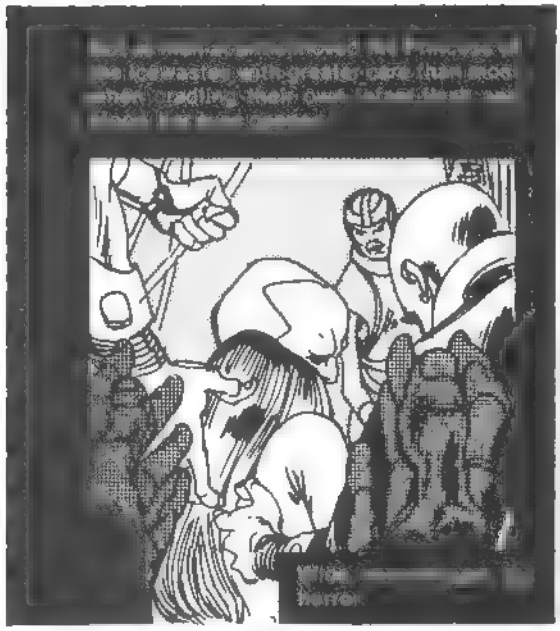
Then, Blackmark's flagship knifed into the fog, and one by one the fleet followed, silent specters gliding through the dank, gray cloud
In time the mist thinned, but its unnatural chill remained Men shivered and pulled their c oaks tight about them though ocean streams from the tropics kept this sea and the shores it touched warmer than the icewastes to the south For the pervading chill came not from temperature but an eerie atmosphere of expectancy that hung over the fleet like a great weight slated to fall at some unknown hour So each hand shivered and waited Waited for something
Over the objections of many who said anything encountered in the Northern Sea was to be avoided, Blackmark ordered the engines stopped and men to the oars Slowly the great ship came alongside the drifting, bobbing boat
Hold your oars! Ready with a line! I'm anxious to see who goes boating in Psi-Keep's waters and--
Off our port bow... a small boat!
The words caught in Blackmark's throat as with the creak and slap of timbers, the two crafts brushed each other and he stared down into the launch

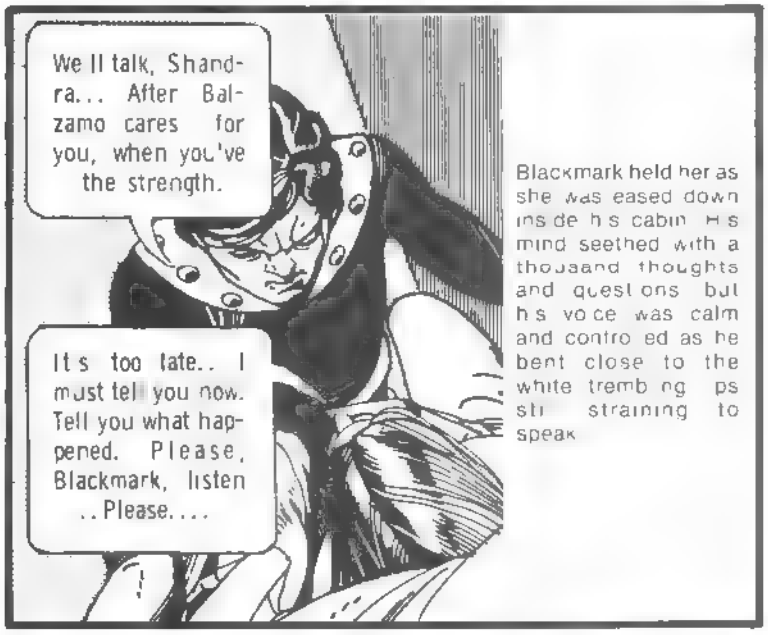
Something wet touched Blackmark's arm, warmer and thicker than the water of the sea. The launch rocked and Shandra rolled toward him, a cry of pain bursting from her lips

Seeing her mercifully lost in a deep faint, Blackmark eased the blade from the wound, eyes grimly fixed on the hilt's familiar carvings

His hard-muscled legs braced against the launch's pitching, Blackmark carefully lifted his wife upward toward the ship's rail, shouting in a voice hoarse and trembling

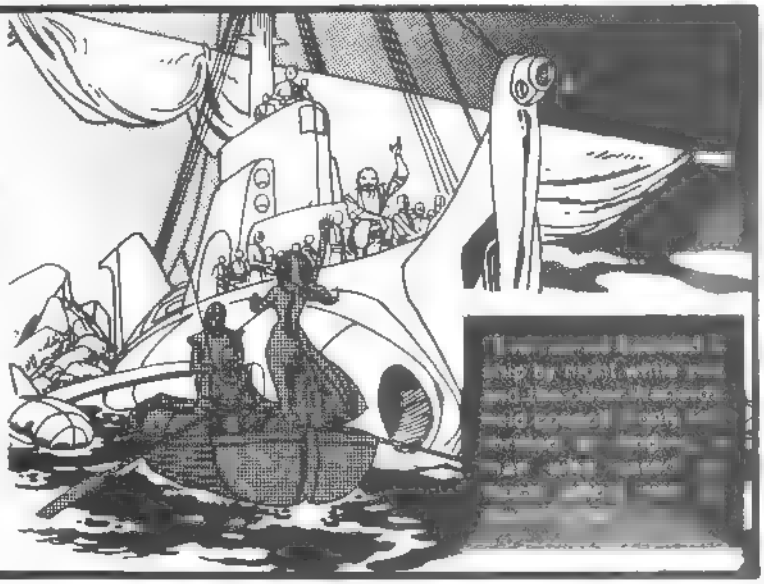

Get her to my cabin... And do it gently, damn you! I'll have the hide of any man who causes her pain!
Someone tell Balzamo! And him only! I want no priests with their potions and incantations or battlefield healers whose sole skill is hewing off limbs to touch her!




We'll talk, Shandra... After Balzamo cares for you, when you've the strength.
It's too late.. I must tell you now. Tell you what happened. Please, Blackmark, listen ..Please....

Blackmark held her as she was eased down inside his cabin. His mind seethed with a thousand thoughts and questions but his voice was calm and controlled as he bent close to the white trembling lips still straining to speak

'I was so alone, Blackmark. The Westlands were strange and new, and you were so seldom near. When Reynard began his attentions to me, I couldn't help but welcome them. Our time together seemed like the times with you at Castle Shannux. And when he said he loved me and wanted me to come with him, I couldn't help but go.'



We've cleared the harbor. Use the power plant! Our course is northward. NORTH!

"For one foolish instant, I let myself think he might mean my own kingdom. Reynard smashed the notion quickly, and every other hope I'd ever dared to entertain."

"When Reynard gave the command, I thought little of it, but as we retired to his cabin, it nagged softly at my mind. The first crack in the structure of dreams I'd built."

Reynard, don't the Common lands lie to the south... Shouldn't that be our course?

So it should, my lady... IF we were sailing for the Commonlands! But I've chosen a more exciting destination.....

...PSI-KEEP, dear Shandra! Someone has to warn them of the attack your husband's mounting... I'd rather it was ME who gains the advantages from doing it than anyone else!

B-betray men to... MUTANTS? You can't mean it, you CAN'T!

Sit at my side in Psi-Keep or fling yourself into the sea! I'll accept either choice... You've served your true purpose!

"I went mad with fear and loathing That I could have loved a man ready to side with monsters who slaughtered my father and his people! I turned on him, scratching, biting, clawing, hoping somehow to hurt him as he had me and knowing I never could!"

Blackmark will find you! He'll kill you if I can't!
You were anxious enough to flee his bed, but you still think of him as a savior, like every other clod! I'll tell you what Blackmark will find.....

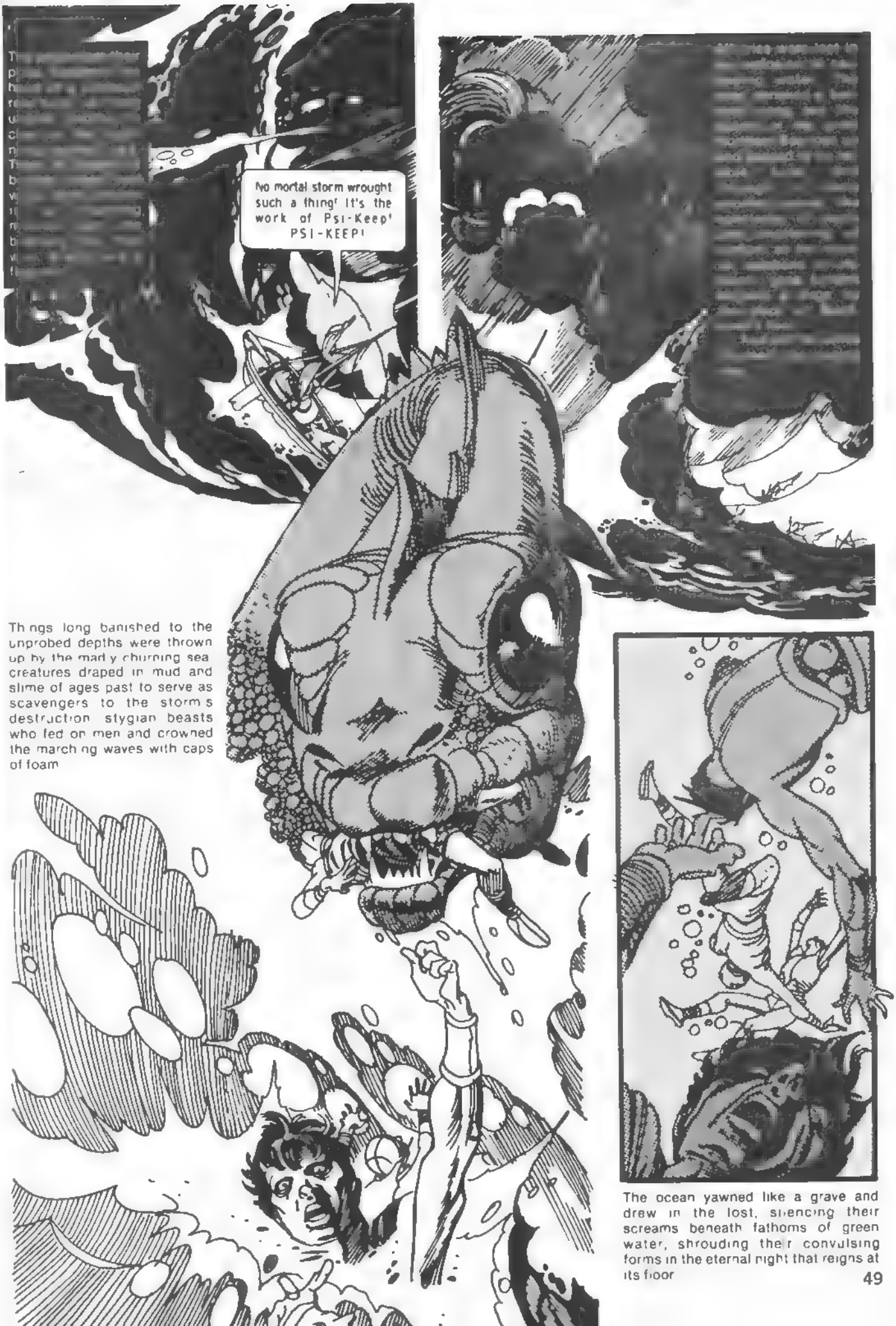
"I prayed the blow was mortal After the way Reynard had twisted me, used me, I wanted to die When I didn't, I waited for him to strike me again. Instead, he set me adrift."

Can .can you forgive me Blackmark? The dying would be better if I knew.
You won't die, Shandra. And you've no reason to need forgiveness. If you failed me in any way, it's because I failed you first!

Blackmark spoke on, softly, tenderly He spoke of the new life they would have, of the happiness they would recapture Only when Balzamo entered the cabin did he realize she had again fallen unconscious, and he wondered if she had heard his voice at all

He read their expressions as he stepped into the crowd gathered on the deck. They had guessed from the finding of Shandra what had happened. They knew that along with Psi-Keep's monsters, a traitor awaited their invasion, an invasion that would now be fully prepared for.

Sentry Blackmark pushed through them. Their fear and indecision followed him as he walked to the rail. He stared into the distance where sea and sky blended into a smoke-gray smudge. Out there was Psi-Keep and REYNARD!



Things long banished to the unprobed depths were thrown up by the madly churning sea creatures draped in mud and slime of ages past to serve as scavengers to the storm's destruction stygian beasts who fed on men and crowned the marching waves with caps of foam

The ocean yawned like a grave and drew in the lost, silencing their screams beneath fathoms of green water, shrouding their convulsing forms in the eternal night that reigns at its floor

Blackmark lashed himself to the mast beside Shandra, pressing his body tightly to hers, as though by their very closeness he might share his strength and vitality, his raging will to survive. Through it all, he continued to show his defiance.
And as wind blasted, rain-lashed eternities passed, the storm began to spend itself
THREE SHIPS, Sire! The mightiest force ever mounted in New Earth and but three battered ships remain! Psi-Keep has RUINED us, Lord Blackmark. There's nothing we can do!
We can clear the decks and make our three ships ready to sail on, Bosun.

There,Bosun. We sail on to there.
My Lord, by sailing on, you of course mean sailing on back to home To the Westlands? Even repaired, our vessels will scarcely be prepared for anything el—
Indistinct in the gathering twilight a jagged black mass broke the grayed junction of sea and sky that was the horizon And though undefined at the distance there was something uncomfortable about the thrust of the dark shape something ominous
Land! But, Sire, what land could there be in these waters except--
There was a moment of choked hesitation Then the Bosun forced the words from his throat in a hoarse whisper '—Psi Keep!'

CHAPTER IV

Blackmark s first thoughts after the storm had been for Shandra But his act ons dur ng the tempest had enabled her to cont nue cling ng to l fe With his Queen in Balzamo s care, h s m nd had turned to the damage wrought to his fleet And amid the de vastation, he had found hope

Why would the storm abate before al the ships had been destroyed un ess the mutant masters of Ps Keep had some how stretched their men tal powers to the fullest and cou d no longer sustain them? Grant ng this, to return to the Westlands would only allow the mutant w zards time to regain fu l strength But what f they suffered a sudden, unexpected attack ?

Thus an hour before first light, three battered hast ly repaired ves sels drew into a rock-lined cove, and for the first t me, men assaulted the towering black cliffs that were the natura ramparts of fortress Ps Keep

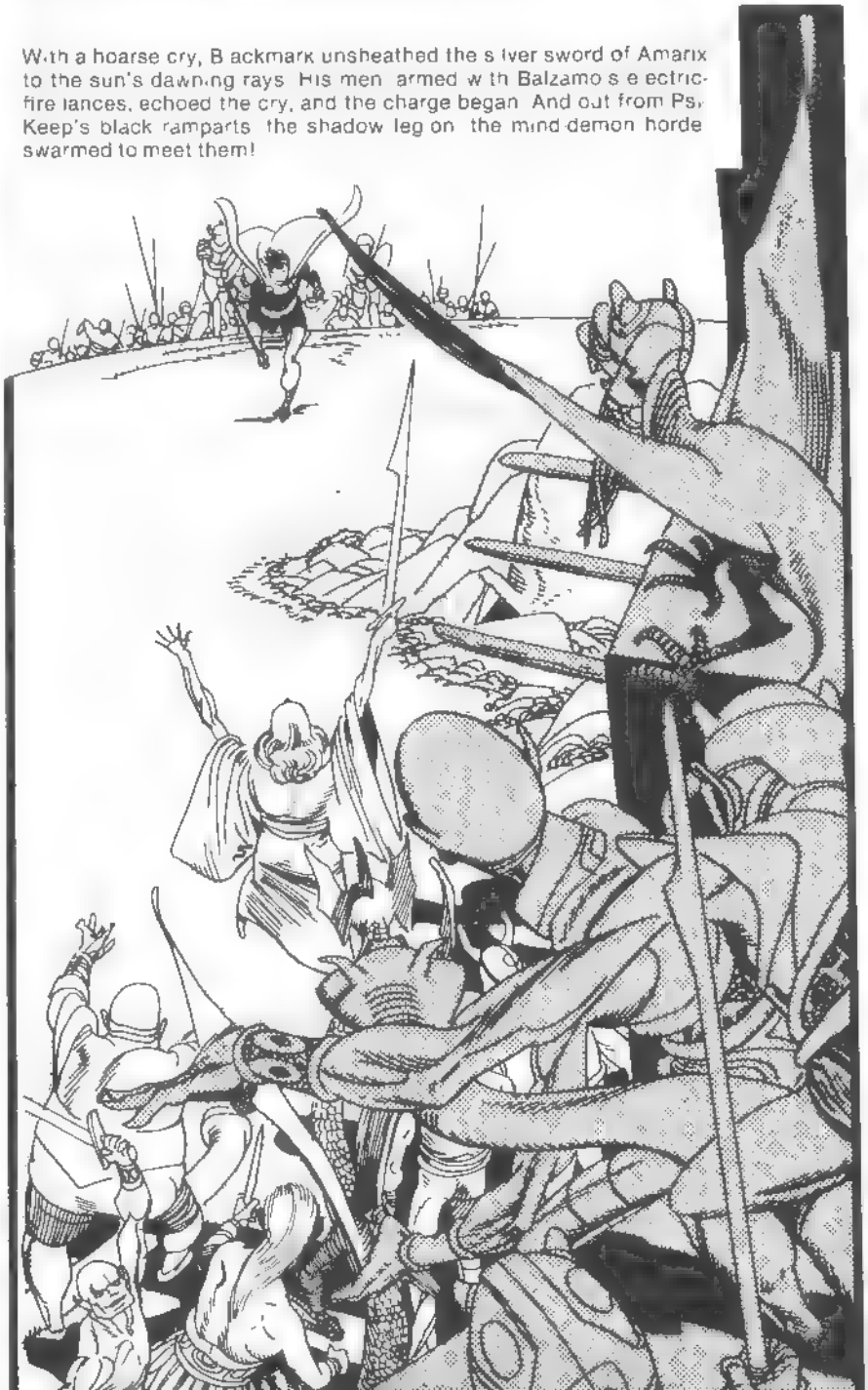
I know you are needed here, old friend, yet I have regrets over taking you from ministering to the Lady Shandra.
Only time and rest can now determine her fate, Blackmark. She would not benefit from my staying . and much might be lost.
The Westland King nodded grimly. Of all in the expedition, only the former scientist and adviser to Lord Amar x had ever looked upon charts of the island fortress, knowledge they would surely need
Have I calculated correctly? Can we hope to surprise the mutant masters?
There is wisdom in suspecting they may be weakened, but such are their mental powers I fear no one may touch these shores undetected and--
MY LORD! ABOVE US-- !
There was time to
ing geyser

The avalanche of death sent down by Psi-Keep's demoniac defenders had cut heavily into the already sparse ranks of Blackmark's army, but it also obscured the maneuvers of those untouched by the cascading rocks and bubbling rivulets of scalding lead

The ancient charts studied by Balzamo served him well. Masked by the towering sheer walls of the crevice, a trail, sometimes no more than a narrow jutting lip on the time-worn stone, twisted upward through the rocks. And along its treacherous course, Blackmark led his men higher and higher.

Until the soft blue haze of first light found them on a barren plateau where wind weathered rocks jutted like gravestones, crouched against a chill morning breeze and their own gnawing fear, staring toward the rear battlements of the ebon-walled castle that crowned the sand fortress of Psi Keep

With a hoarse cry, Blackmark unsheathed the silver sword of Amarix to the sun's dawning rays. His men armed with Balzamo's electric-fire lances, echoed the cry, and the charge began. And out from Psi-Keep's black ramparts the shadow legion the mind-demon horde swarmed to meet them!

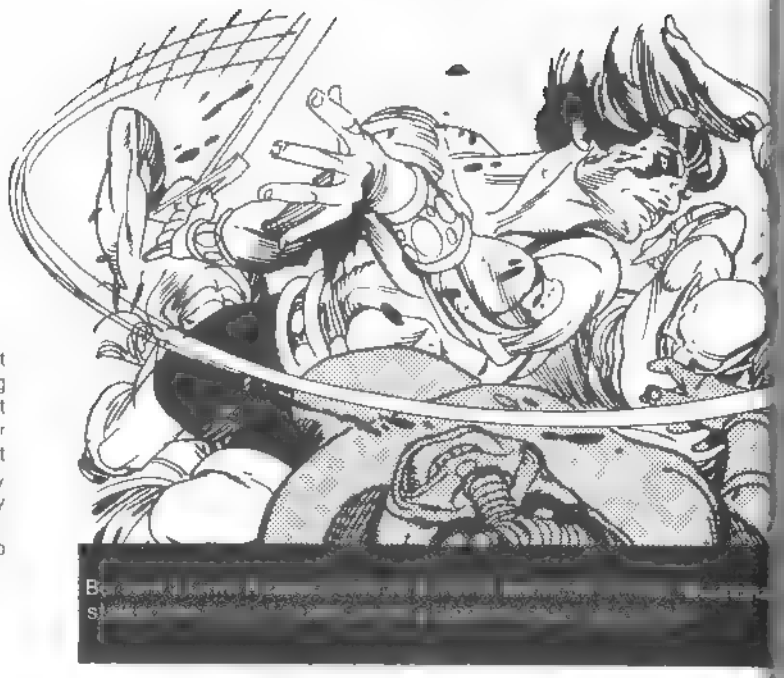


But this was not the terrible tide that had slain and slaughtered as it swept the Kingdoms of New Earth. The mutant masters had worked their storm and wrought their avalanche and now their vast mental powers suffered under prolonged pressure, for the first time in memory, Psi-Keep was on the defensive.

In the center of the combat as fire lances crackled and crashed around him filling the air with a brimstone scent Blackmark found the full measure of the mutant Lords' desperation. For here were not apparitions of twisted minds, but creatures of flesh and blood MUTANT FLESH AND BLOOD!

Then Blackmark no onger saw Rey nard A spearpoint raked a crimson ine across h s ribs The thrust meant to d sembowel left pain ike a whisper of f re and a erted h s crazed m nd to the mutant swarm about to bear h m down

He heard nothing but the blade s piercing whine felt nothing but the lashing power anc ent sc ence sent coursing through every corded muscle, every taut fiber of his body driv ng h m to strike to destroy



Damn me! That MARK— I've seen it BEFORE! Years before on the thigh of some householder's bitch!
YOU'RE the wet-nosed whelp I set free after I had my way with the woman, then skewered her and her man!

The battle swirled violently around Blackmark and Reynard yet left them strangely untouched fac ng each other motion essly, two men n the ca m of the hurricane s eye

Then, surpr se swept the Lord of the Common ands gaze and his mouth tw sted into an amused sm e

The grin froze on Reynard's face but the mirth drained away His eyes glittered madly

But for the birthmark I might never have known or remembered! Might never have known that the upstart slave I've hated for fulfilling the dream of uniting New Earth I failed to achieve was the little cottager's cur I mistakenly let live!

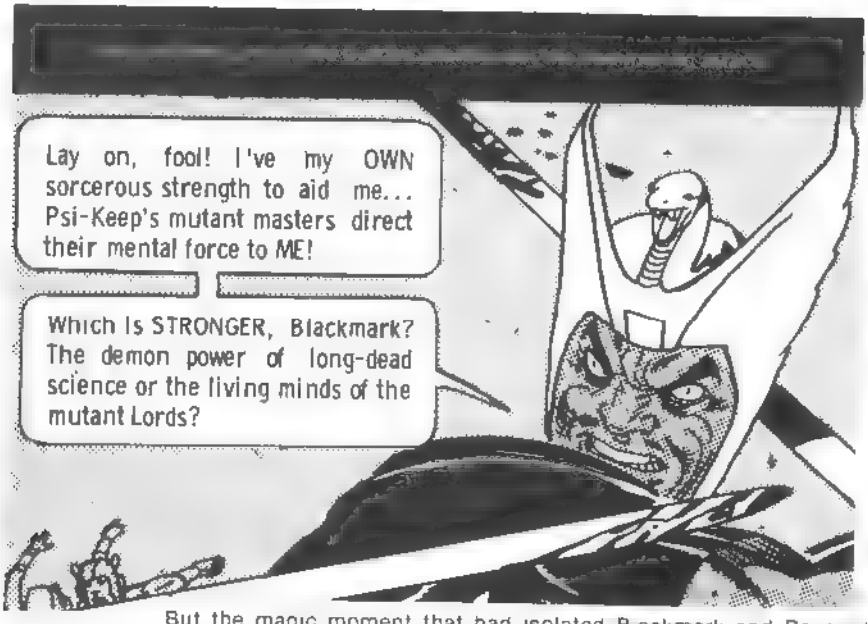
How often does life give one the chance to correct his mistakes Blackmark? This battle helmet isn't as fine as the one you may remember covering my face when I hacked down your dirt-grubbing parents

But I think you'll find my sword just as sharp and sure!

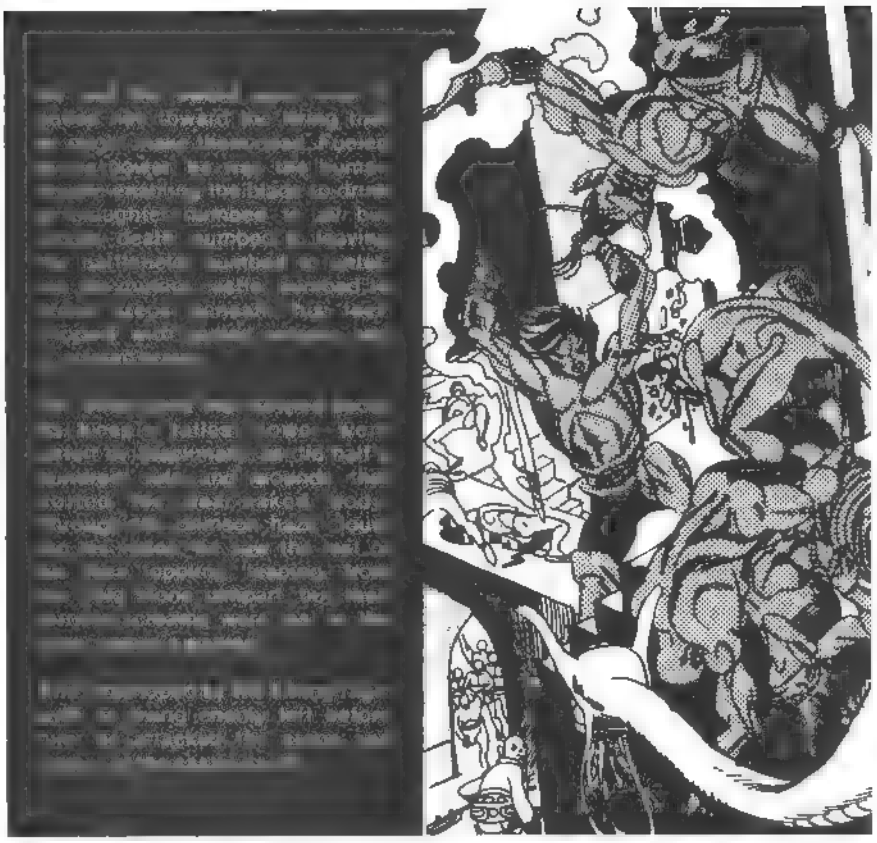
Like lightning striking the sword of Amarix flashed in a deadly arc as Blackmark sprang toward Reynard with the swiftness of a blood crazed beast But, incredibly, the renegade Lord s blade met the stroke, and then another, and yet another And the air where the two swords crossed was shot with fire and flying sparks

No man had ever stood up to the silver blade when its pre-holocaust power was but part al y un eashed, yet now, when it shrieked and surged w th the fury of all Hell s demons set free Reynard matched t with an unholy fury of his own!

Already gripped by h s rage for revenge Black mark howled w th frustration, and opened his m nd his very being to the throbb ng force of the sword in his hand, to its song of death and madness


Lay on, fool! I've my OWN sorcerous strength to aid me... Psi-Keep's mutant masters direct their mental force to ME!
Which Is STRONGER, Blackmark? The demon power of long-dead science or the living minds of the mutant Lords?

But the magic moment that had isolated B ackmark and Reynard from the battle passed Suddenly a tide of men and mutants locked in morta combat edd ed about them And in seconds a gulf of darting spears and thrashing swords a sea of screaming wounded and gore stained dead, separated the two vengeance maddened warriors



As if in answer to Blackmark's rage, the skies roiled and the earth shook. Fire ripped the guts of Heaven and for a moment, Blackmark seemed to be an avenging knife in the hands of God.

And powered by the awful loathing of the twisted mutant Lords for men and mank nd, powered by his own consuming hatred for the young Westland King, Reynard charged

Reynard's leap broke in m d-air as Black mark his face an animal mask of rage, thrust the sonic-powered sword of Amarix through his head

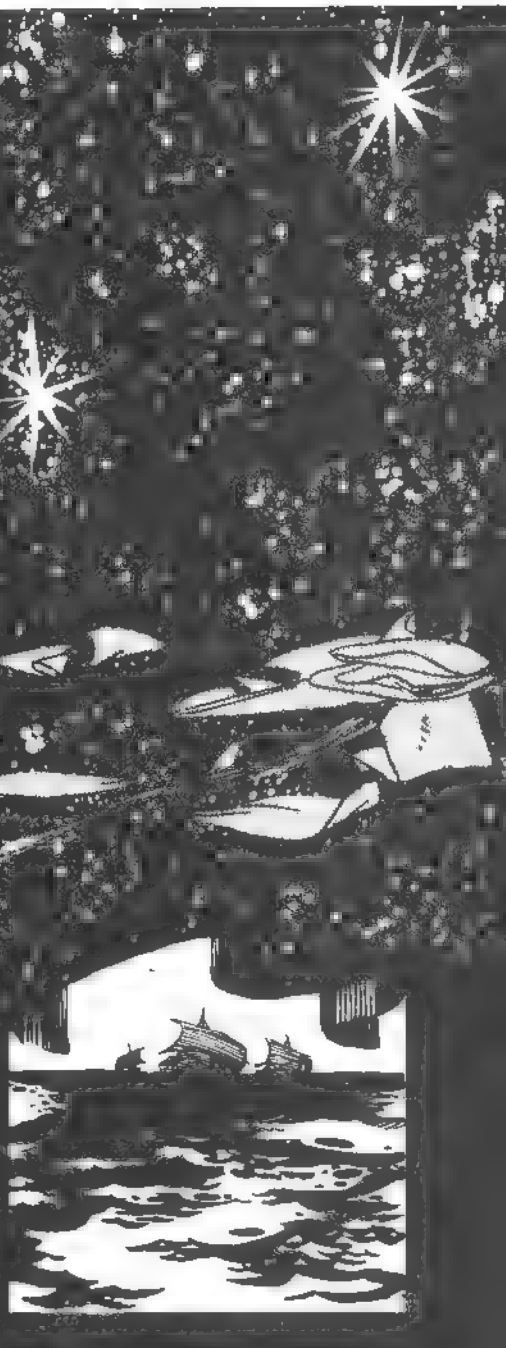
The reverberating scream that trailed the air after him came not from Reynard's throat alone but the bowels of the burning cast e as well
For somewhere deep within the stronghold ike Reynard s plummeting form, like the r own last hope Psi-Keep's mutant masters were dying

A short time later, the King and his scientist adv sor stood on the batt efie d before the castle, where what remained of B ackmark s army had gathered to watch Psi Keep die

Where will it end, Balzamo? Reynard is dead and the fortress that threatened mankind burns... Yet Amarix's visions flay my mind like demon inquisitors!
What dreams, what ends did your former Lord strive for? Isn't New Earth now free? Won't I ever be?
The mysteries Amarix made you heir to, emerge in their own time, lad. Why embrace despair until they do? Look!
Here on this butcher s field practically at the gates of dread Psi-Keep, a flower can bloom! If a small miracle like this exists, why not hope for you... for all New Earth?
I can't read hope for a world in one bloom, old friend, but it's a pretty enough thing... Too pretty for this damn place!
Let it cheer Shandra instead of Psi-Keep's ghosts.
And what of Lady Shandra, sire? Have you forgotten her? Can you really be so bitter knowing she awaits on the ship... Awaits you to take her home?
Shandra... and home! Balzamo, under the spell of the sword and the killing, I had nearly forgotten...
How fares Lady Shandra? Can she see me now, or does she still sleep?
N-No, sire. She does not sleep

And Blackmark led his men down from the fortress island s forbidd ng heights back to the cove and the r waiting ships

Blackmark s eyes took n the white mask that was Shandra's face
He saw her limp hand hung over the bed s edge And he knew



He held and rocked her cold slight form wh le his hee heedless y ground the life out of a now unnoticed sprig of green

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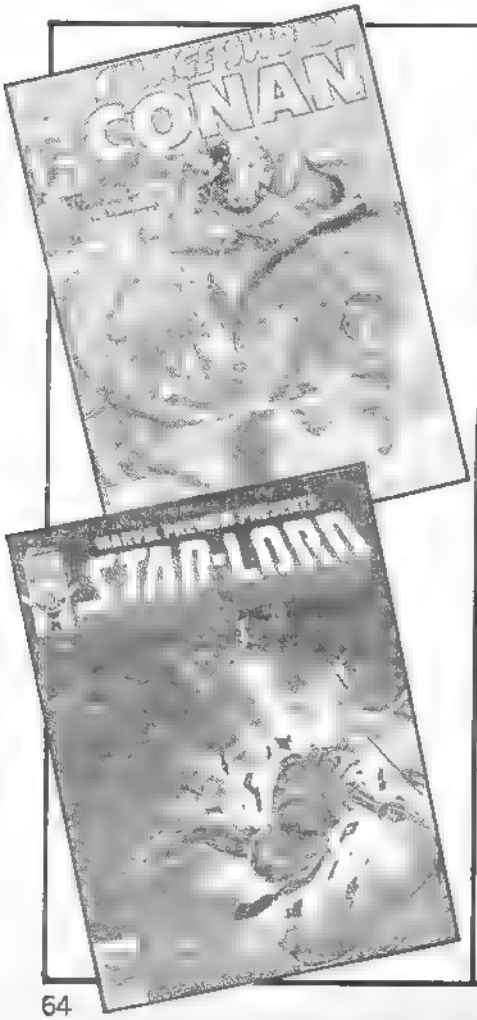

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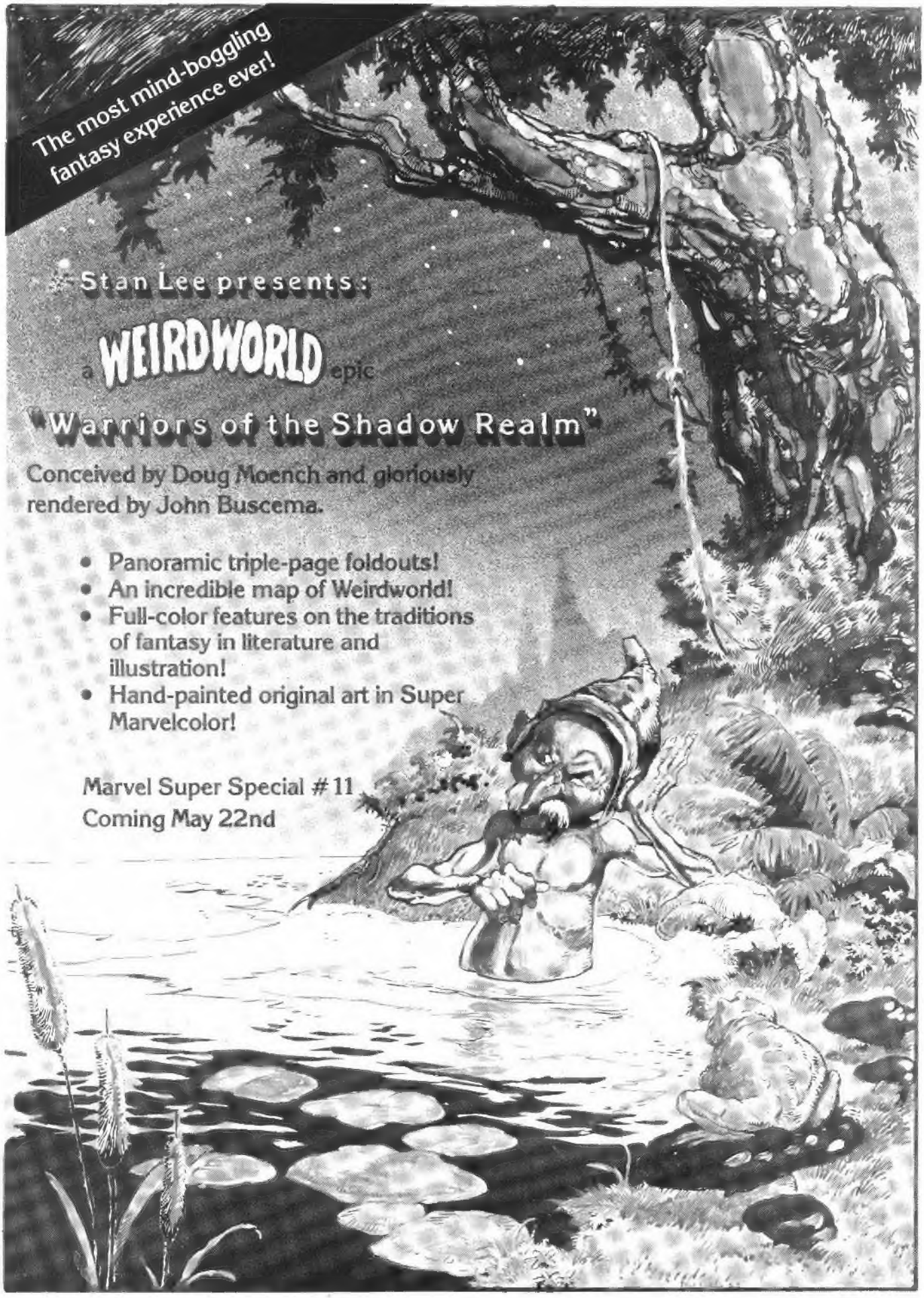
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